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"It came in little waves": Feminist Imagery in Chantal Akerman's *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* +

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**"It came in little waves":
Feminist Imagery in Chantal Akerman's *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* +**

By

Staci Dubow

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Film and Media Studies



Advisor: Ken Eisenstein



Film Department Chair: John Hunter

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ABSTRACT

Chantal Akerman writes, “she who seeks shall find, find all too well, and end up clouding her vision with her own preconceptions.”¹ This thesis addresses the films of Chantal Akerman from a theoretical feminist film perspective. There are many lenses through which Akerman’s rich body of work can be viewed, and I would argue that she herself never intended for it to be understood in just one way. I wish to situate Akerman’s films, in particular her 1974 *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* (1h 30m), within a discourse of other feminist film theorists and makers that were further rooted in the women's movement of the 1960s. Using this framework, I will argue that Akerman not only addressed the calls of these feminist scholars, but also exceeded their breadth, by drawing attention to, and working across, boundaries, in addition to dismantling patriarchal narrative conventions.

¹ Chantal Akerman “On D’Est.” In *Bordering Fiction: Chantal Akerman’s “D’Est,”* ed. Kathy Kalbreich and Bruce Jenkins. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1995).

INTRODUCTION

We surround ourselves daily with media's representations. In order to responsibly consume these messages, it is essential to understand the dominant ideologies being conveyed by them and to configure the theoretical tools necessary to challenge and refine problematic representations. Feminists have long articulated the need for a fundamental restructuring of artistic content and, I think more importantly, form. I would argue that Chantal Akerman's films address this call to action. My title, "It came in little waves" embodies many of the factors that make Akerman's cinema feminist in both theory and practice. "It came in little waves" refers to the female capacity for multiple orgasms. It refers to multiple waves of feminism, as a project that is never complete. It especially refers to the infinite possibilities through which viewers can make sense of Akerman's films. In each case, "little waves" signifies a feminist framework because it applauds plurality rather than the fixity that had come to define a male-dominated cannon.

Akerman's work, in particular *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, has been crucial in challenging the aesthetic and thematic patriarchal tendencies of cinema. Unfortunately, aside from three book-length analyses, Ivone Margulies' *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (1996), Veronica Pravadelli's *Performance, Rewriting Identity: Chantal Akerman's Postmodern Cinema* (2000) and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster's *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman* (2003), there has not been a sufficient amount of scholarship on Akerman's work. And there is especially minimal scholarship on the ways in which Chantal Akerman's films have not only fulfilled, but exceeded, the calls of second-wave feminists and theorists.

Feminist film theory contains two primary ambitions. The first asserts the necessary overhaul of traditional representations of women on screen. And the second requires a more fundamental restructuring of film form itself. I argue that Chantal Akerman's *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* fulfills both of these calls and as such demonstrates a decidedly feminist style of imagery. I use the term feminist not only to suggest that Akerman's films advocate for gender equality, though I believe they do. But also, I use this term to convey the revolutionary attitude with which Akerman approaches both the content and form of her work. Veronica Pravadelli writes "the model of textual analysis inspired by semiotics and psychoanalysis allowed critics to detect a feminist stance [in Akerman's films] not only at the level of content, but also of language."² In this way, Akerman's approach to filmmaking offers a revolutionary means of dismantling a patriarchal cinematic grammar in favor of a more pluralistic structure.

Akerman's films have largely been studied through the lens of her most well-known work, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* (1975). Decades after its release, *The New York Times* called *Jeanne Dielman* the "first masterpiece of the feminine in the history of the cinema."³ The bulk of this film's over-three hour run time is devoted to the depiction of a single mother's tedious schedule of household tasks cooking, cleaning, raising her son, and we learn later, earning a living as a sex worker. At over three hours long, the film's static observation of Jeanne demonstrates the tedium of women's domestic work. In the film's pivotal conclusion, Jeanne orgasms while servicing a client, then calmly dresses and fatally stabs him in the chest.

²Veronica Pravadelli. *Performance, Rewriting Identity: Chantal Akerman's Postmodern Cinema*. (Michigan: Otto Publishing, 2000), 187.

³Dennis Lim, "Then as Now, The Terrors of Routine," *The New York Times*, January 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/movies/18lim.html>

The film combines Akerman's interest in the structural film movement and the feminist project. To many scholars, the film was understood as a decidedly feminist statement. Akerman's images offered a window into a long-hidden generation of women, whose household confinement had stripped them of a voice and relegated them to a tedious life of domesticity. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* was one of the first films to bring women's reality, in particular the twentieth-century white women's reality, hidden by walls of domestic responsibility, to screen. Part of the film's dialectical mastery stems from its concurrent star performance by Delphine Seyrig, who plays Dielman, and its overwhelming sense of the mundane. Its sheer length invokes weariness, while taking on the style of a monumental epic.

Akerman often uses this strategy, of elevating the ordinary, to bring light to neglected stories and peoples. By offering a voice to these women, who often take the form of herself or some enacted version of herself, Akerman's work might also be understood as an emancipatory statement. I was personally drawn to her chronicle, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* during my sophomore year at Bucknell, when it played as part of Professor Rebecca Meyer's "Tuesday Night Series." For me, it not only fostered my already growing interest in both avant-garde film and feminist history, but also powerfully altered the way in which I experienced film and the world outside of the theatre.

At times, Akerman would embrace her canonical film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* as a feminist work. Once she wrote, "what is true is that I was speaking for all women: *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080*

Bruxelles: what woman didn't feel something about that?"⁴ Still at others she would reject the label altogether. In an interview with *The A.V. Club* she asserts:

I think I am speaking about people. Jeanne Dielman is not special. I can do that with a man, going to work and doing the same thing and being happy because he has the key and he opens the door and then his papers are there and his secretary. Imagine, and then something has changed and he can't stand it. Because change is dangerous. Change is fear, change is opening the jail. That's why it is so difficult for yourself to change deeply.⁵

The distance Akerman creates between her work and a feminist label speaks to the way in which her approach to filmmaking defies easy analysis or categorization. Still, I would argue that the film is decidedly female-centric. It concerns a woman occupying a feminine space and even features an all-female film crew. This portrait of a woman's domestic life unraveling questions the dichotomy between the Madonna and the Whore and as such instantly became a work of close academic analysis, especially in feminist film circles. Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* is certainly an impressive and complicated work, and the film that introduced me to Akerman's brilliance. But it is not the film that will occupy the bulk of this thesis.

I will look to a lesser known project, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, made a year prior and containing similar thematic ambitions. Throughout this thesis, I will argue that *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s content and form address notions of spectatorship in a distinctly feminist way that set the stage for Akerman's later representations of female confinement and the boundaries of performative gender. The alternate viewing experience that Akerman

⁴ Chantal Akerman, Interview by Élisabeth Lebovici, "No Idolatry and Losing Everything That Made You a Slave." *Mousse Magazine*, December 2011. <http://mousse magazine.it/chantal-akerman-elisabeth-lebovici-2011/>

⁵ Chantal Akerman, Interview by Sam Adams, "Interview with Chantal Akerman." *The AV Club*, January 2010.

creates, offers one method through which filmmakers might begin to eliminate the “male gaze” as articulated by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey that dominated Classical Hollywood since its conception. Of Akerman’s first 10 films, as recorded by IMDB, over half feature prominently in my thesis. It is important to note that *Criterion Collection*’s “Eclipse Series,” which is the first of its kind to identify and present Akerman as a filmmaker worth archiving, has been crucial in increasing access to quality copies of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* and Akerman’s other early films.

While Akerman is often grouped with feminist and queer artists, she has distanced herself from essentialist feminism, as a challenge to the boundaries of identity so often engrained in the cinematic language. Essentialist feminism refers to the belief that there is innate fundamental difference between the sexes and genders. Akerman’s resistance to categorization seems to respond to cinema’s formulaic presentation of the world and the rigid boundaries of gender it creates. I am particularly interested in her work as a filmmaker because she so aptly evades the conventions that Hollywood cinema sustains. That is why I do not claim that Akerman displays the “female gaze” that Mulvey calls for. This would be too binary for Akerman. I can only suggest that she hold an anti-male gaze.

Structurally, my thesis will first introduce readers to a theoretical feminist film perspective, which will ground later discussions of the ways in which Akerman’s *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* subverts normative spectatorial perceptions. Then I will briefly provide a biographical context for the filmmaker in focus. The rest of my thesis will be separated into three sections, *Je, Il, and Elle*, which correspond to the three-part structure of the film in focus. Throughout this analysis I will incorporate connections to several of

Akerman's other films, including *Saute Ma Ville* (1968,) *La Chambre* (1972), *News from Home* (1976), *Les Rendez-vous D'Anna* (1978), and *A Couch in New York* (1996).

The following paragraphs with synopses each of the films I plan to discuss, in order to provide a frame of reference before I launch into more detailed analyses in the coming chapters. Akerman's first short, *Saute Ma Ville*, takes an experimental look at a young woman, played by the director, who seals herself off in her apartment to complete household chores and, at the film's conclusion, tragically gasses herself to death. This fact is made all the more somber given that Akerman's parents are both Holocaust survivors, a fact I will revisit later in Akerman's biography.

La Chambre, a film made the same year as Akerman's iconic *Jeanne Dielman*, pans 360-degrees, capturing an apartment's furniture and female inhabitant. This experimental short is the director's first film made in New York. Akerman, who at that point had returned to her native Belgium, made *News from Home*. This experimental documentary features images of New York City, set to a voice-over of Akerman reading letters sent by her mother between 1971 and 1973, when she lived in the city.

The next two films, *Rendez Vous D'Anna* and *A Couch in New York*, are more narrative in structure than the above-mentioned projects and feature a hired performer, rather than Akerman's own acting. *Rendez Vous D'Anna* chronicles three days in the life of Anna, a successful filmmaker with a biography reminiscent of Akerman's own. The film's protagonist wanders through various European cities, on her way to promote her most recent film in Essen, Germany. Along the way she meets an eccentric cast of characters, including a man with whom she has an affair, an old family friend, her mother, a stranger on the train and her boyfriend. Each character's

narcissistic autobiographical narration actually details the broader history and current climate of Western Europe. *A Couch in New York* is undoubtedly Akerman's most commercial endeavor. In this romantic comedy, Dr. Henry Harriston, a New York psychoanalyst, exchanges his apartment with the French dancer Béatrice Saulnier. Originally strangers, the two find themselves becoming increasingly enmeshed in the others life, and, in classical Hollywood style, eventually fall in love.

As I move through my analysis of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* and accompanying films I will continue to return to several themes, techniques, and motifs. These elements recur in Akerman's films and are essential to any discussion of her work from a feminist lens. The major themes that I will identify in Akerman's work are identity, confinement, gendered expectations and authorship. Techniques that figure prominently in her films include abstraction of space and time, atypical framing and narrative suspension. These tools invite viewers to actively engage in the creation of meaning rather than follow a script imposed upon them by the author.

The recurring motifs I will refer to consist of mirrors, letters, the mother figure and performativity. Mirrors figure prominently throughout Akerman's oeuvre, functioning as a reflection of her character's internal states and the societal norms imposed upon them. Akerman also regularly incorporates letters in her films. The bulk of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s first section depicts Julie writing a letter to an unknown recipient. *News from Home*'s audio track is entirely comprised of letters written by Akerman's mother, to her daughter. *La Chambre* begins with the image of a letter tacked onto the wall. And in *A Couch in New York*, Henry falls in love with Béatrice, though he has never seen her, upon reading letters written to her by former lovers. The mother figure

emerges in virtually every single one of Akerman's films, either through dialogue or visual symbols, and speaks to Akerman's close, yet complicated, relationship with her own mother. Questions of veracity are also crucial for Akerman. One extreme example, which only figures briefly in the body of my thesis, is the artificial snow that falls outside of Julie's window in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle's* first section. In later sections I will illuminate specifically how these motifs inform Akerman's feminist practice.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The feminist film theorists and makers of the 1960s and 70s sought to construct a new paradigm for ordering the female experience. They envisioned film as a contemporary medium that could reconstruct representations of female life and subvert the position of women, politically, socially and sexually. The emerging body of feminist film criticism was buttressed by the second-wave feminist movement. In many regards, black women were alienated from the messages articulated by this movement. As such, feminist film criticism, which was steeped in the energy and vision of mid-twentieth century feminism, also largely disregarded the concerns of Black women. Chantal Akerman's films, which I will study as distinctly feminist, cannot be treated as distinct from their time. Thus, any study of Akerman's films within a feminist framework, must be understood only as representing womanhood from the perspective of a White, Belgian, cis-gender, and bisexual female artist. Though, I will argue that Akerman's politics are more nuanced and inclusive than other second wave feminists of her time.

Chantal Akerman emerged within a growing body of feminist thinkers and film theorists, including Allison Bechdel, Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir, the editors

of the American film journal, *Women in Film*, Hélène Cixous, Claire Johnson, and Laura Mulvey. While some early film feminists were primarily influenced by ideas from sociological theory, emphasizing the female character’s passive role within cinematic narrative conventions, others used critical theory and psychoanalysis to focus on the ways in which filmic texts affect the viewer and subject and how filmic representations of women reinforced sexism. No matter the background of their academic discipline, feminist film theorists understood media’s powerful ability to both reflect and reinforce oppressive regimes and articulated a necessary restructuring of film’s aesthetic and thematic function.

The modern viewer is undoubtedly confronted by sexist representation of women in film. The Bechdel test is one useful tool through which we might detect the overwhelming pattern of female passivity in film. The test, which was named after the American cartoon artist Alison Bechdel, first appeared in the artist’s comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985). In a strip called “The Rule” two women consider seeing a film.

One of the women explains that she does not see a movie unless it has at least two women in it, who talk to each other about something besides a man. The women are unable to find a movie that meets the requirement and decide to go home together.



Figure 0.1 Source: Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, 1985

The strip genuinely represents filmic representations of women in reality. A study of gender representation in 855 of the top-grossing U.S. films from 1950 to 2006 showed

that on average, two male characters were featured for every female character and that women's bodies were explicitly shown in on-screen sex scenes twice as often as male characters, a proportion that has only increased over time.⁶ The test offers insight into female representation in film because it asks not just about the quantity of women seen on screen, but also about the depth given to their backgrounds and concerns. In hundreds of cases, the Bechdel test proves that women in film are represented only as relational to men, not as independent actors.

Bechdel's critiques of modern cinema actually originate in written works of the early 20th century and prior. Virginia Woolf, noticing a similar pattern in her field of literature, says in the 1929 book "A Room of One's Own":

"All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple...And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. ... They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men."⁷

Wolf's assertion proves that while film might have further propagated a phallogocentric outlook, literature had long been dominated by notions of female passivity and relationality to their male counterparts. In other words, dynamic depictions of the female experience, in particular female to female relationships, had long been neglected in narrative fiction. Instead, women have generally been depicted as isolated entities, featured only as support for male activity.

To feminist film theorists, who drew on Wolf's claims of female's literary passivity, cinema theoretically and literally reinforces patriarchy. Feminists as early as

⁶ Amy Bleakley et al. "Trends of Sexual and Violent Content by Gender in Top-Grossing U.S. Films, 1950–2006.," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 51, no. 1 (2012): 73-79.
[http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(12\)00069-9/fulltext](http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(12)00069-9/fulltext).

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 107.

Simone De Beauvoir saw cinema as a reflection and reproduction of an order which left women passive and unnoticed. In her 1949 book, *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir writes “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”⁸ This claim understands the reality that gender is not innate or natural, but rather acquired through culture and institutions. Her book sets out to debunk the myth of the “eternal feminine,” an archetype that imagines a fixed concept of “womanhood,” and necessarily its presumed binary, “manhood.” This archetype presumes that woman possesses fixed qualities of gentleness, emotionality and passivity.

De Beauvoir asserts that in dominant culture, men have claimed the subject position, thereby reducing women to the position of object and other. She writes, “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute - she is the Other”⁹ To her, the othering of women stems from a patriarchal culture rooted and reflected in religion, traditions, language, stories, songs and film. The way in which these mediums and institutions envision the world, construct how people actually understood and experienced their environment. To De Beauvoir and other feminist theorists, film serves as a major vehicle for patriarchal myths, often constructed by the heterosexual male perspective. But women too saw themselves through these representations, and thus often understood their condition as natural.

In 1972, an official declaration of media’s sexist tendencies came from the first issue of the American film journal, *Women & Film*, which announced itself as a part of the 'second wave' feminist movement. It asserts:

⁸ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 2010), 281 .

⁹ Ibid, 3.

The women in this magazine, as part of the women's movement, are aware of the political, psychological, social and economic oppression of women. The struggle begins on all fronts and we are taking up the struggle with women's image in film and women's roles in the film industry—the ways in which we are exploited and the ways to transform the derogatory and immoral attitudes the ruling class and their male lackys [sic] have towards women and other oppressed peoples.¹⁰

The magazine drew on the energy of its time, pronouncing film's potential as a crucial tool in the feminist politics of the decade. Its goals were threefold in revolutionizing the practice: to reconstruct repressive ideologies, to end stereotyping on and off the screen, and to create a feminist film aesthetic.¹¹

Hélène Cixous, another feminist writer and critic, articulated a similar call for female authorship in one of her best-known articles: "The Laugh of Medusa" (1975). This piece, which established Cixous as one of the major post-structural feminist thinkers, tells women that they can either choose to stay trapped, reading a language that does not allow for their expression, or create a means of communicating outside of the current patriarchal system. She writes:

By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.¹²

Cixous argues here, and throughout her essay, for an "écriture féminine" or "women's writing." Écriture féminine is a form of writing, designed to untangle cultural and psychological notions of female difference and the objectification of the female body through language. Cixous suggests that this form of writing might lead to women's

¹⁰ Siew-Hwa Beh and Saunie Salyer, "A Note from the Editors," *Women in Film* 1, no. 5 (1972): 6.

¹¹ Sue Thornham, *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

¹² Hélène Cixous. "The Laugh of Medusa," *The Essential Feminist Reader*, (New York, Modern Library, 2007). 319.

emancipation through the construction of strong self-narratives and a purposeful articulation of identity.

“The Laugh of Medusa” commands women to focus on their individuality and write. If women redefine their identity in their own terms, they might finally be able to “look at the Medusa straight on to see her” and realize “she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”¹³ She also calls for a new form to challenge the traditionally Western, masculine reduction of multiplicity to an uncomplicated system of binary oppositions. To Cixous, writing is a tool, in the same way that film would be a tool for Akerman, for women to advocate for themselves, to move beyond the conventional rules of patriarchal media, and to unshackle the historic confines imposed upon them.

If film helped to create the “eternal feminine” that Simone de Beauvoir problematizes, then it might also help to deconstruct it. In order to begin reshaping existent myths and customs, new theoretical tools must be developed. In the early 1960s and 70s, these tools began to emerge with the growth of British feminist film theory. One early pioneer, who combined feminist film theory and psychoanalysis was Claire Johnson. In her essay “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” (1975), Johnson takes a semiotic approach to deconstruct how women are positioned within the film frame and signified by lighting, costume and other elements. This goes beyond the stereotyped images of women that sociological approaches to feminist film theorized. It argues that merely changing the depiction of woman on screen would not be sufficient, and instead suggests that an entirely new technique and form was required to transform existing practices. She maintains that feminist cinema should act as counter cinema. Set in opposition to the dominant modes of cultural practice, Johnson’s idea of cinema would

¹³ Ibid, 321.

reject traditional narrative and aesthetic techniques and instead pronounce a revolutionary new “feminine perspective.”

In her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, declares the cinematic apparatus, in particular classical Hollywood film style, inherently patriarchal. Mulvey draws on Freudian and Lacanian terms, such as scopophilia, the Oedipus Complex, the mirror stage, fetishism, and voyeurism to interrogate how the gaze functions in mainstream cinema. Scopophilia refers to the derivation of sexual pleasure from looking. This pleasure might be obtained by looking at erotic photographs, pornography, or naked bodies. She outlines three perspectives of looking in cinema, first that of the camera, second that of the characters, and third that of the spectator. She claims that all of these positions are aligned with the male viewer as “the bearer of the look.”

Lacan’s mirror stage refers to a stage in childhood development where children recognize themselves in the mirror. This fosters their developing understanding of the self and other. Mulvey connects Lacan’s theory to film by suggesting that we identify with characters on screen, which thereby reinforces our sense of self. Mulvey continues to suggest that the film canon is most often made by male filmmakers for male spectators, resulting in active male characters, whose actions provide momentum for the narrative, while relegating female characters to a passive role. By presenting women as a spectacle, Mulvey suggests that cinema provides voyeuristic pleasure. It enables viewers to watch others, usually women, without the awareness that they are being observed.

In Freud’s phallogocentric ideology, the woman only symbolizes lack, via lack of a phallus and thus masculine power. She signifies “other” to the dominant male and

becomes his binary opposite. Mulvey uses this psychoanalytic framework as a “political weapon” to explain the ways in which the “patriarchal unconscious” constructs film form and our experience of it. The three central issues that Mulvey raises in her essay are the male gaze, feminist counter-cinema and female spectatorship. According to Mulvey, narrative cinema positions the spectator in the role of masculine authority. Meanwhile, it situates the female on screen as an object of desire and thus subject to, what would become her infamous expression, “the male gaze.” Mulvey connects this gaze to spectatorial pleasure and the “patriarchal unconscious”, to prove how it reflects and reproduces patriarchal culture.

Mulvey’s broad sweeping assertions about the workings of cinema are certainly incomplete. Firstly, she, in some ways, reproduces the very patriarchal order she tries to deconstruct by leaving the female image and spectator inactive, completely absorbed by their own masochistic viewership. In trying to subvert the othering of women in media, she also assumes an implicitly heteronormative male audience, thereby maintaining the female as other and disregarding gender identities that fall outside of the female/male binary. Still, her essay has greatly informed subsequent film theory and practice and will prove useful for my analysis of Chantal Akerman’s films, because of the ways in which it interrogates dominant modes of looking and confronts issues of gendered spectatorship.

While narrative cinema today may not be as overtly patriarchal as it was when Mulvey wrote “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the male gaze persists. Just this year, Harvey Weinstein, one of the leading producers and studio owners in Hollywood, was reported to have harassed dozens of women. His reputation was

protected by a system and industry that granted him immense power, while silencing the voices of victim-survivors. Having produced over 300 films, Weinstein's own misogynistic attitudes are certainly reflected in his immense body of work and perpetuated upon every act of viewing. But he is only one player in a long history of media, steeped in oversimplified heteronormativity and patriarchal ideologies. As major social institutions, film and media both reflect and reinstate these messages. Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" relies on longstanding notions of female passivity. Meanwhile, it shapes contemporary attitudes towards what constitutes masculinity and femininity. My thesis will suggest an alternative to the "male gaze" and in doing so subvert these normative expectations of femininity and masculinity.

Laura Mulvey briefly offers an alternative to the "male gaze" through the avant-garde. She suggests "the first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment."¹⁴ The avant-garde is a mode of



Figure 0.2 Source: Snow, *Quatre Panneaux Gris et Quatre Figures*, 1963

filmmaking that interrogates the apparatus of film itself. Thus, in its evaluation of traditional filmic conventions and employment of non-narrative forms, the avant-garde *might* offer an alternative to the patriarchal nature of dominant cinema. But some of the movement's projects, like Mike Snow's "Walking Woman," certainly do not align

¹⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Hampshire, England: Houndmills Publishing, 1989). 816.

with Mulvey's feminist politics. The Canadian avant-garde filmmaker, reproduced his "Walking Woman" — a sculptural silhouette of one woman— from 1961-1967. He created photographs, films, painting and sculptures based on this cutout, imagining the woman as the sole *object* of his work. While Snow does come from the same avant-garde background, his six year-long project establishes his experimental work in at least partial opposition to Mulvey.

Both the avant-garde and feminist film theory call for the interrogation of film's apparatus and a necessary restructuring of dominant cinematic strategies. But the avant-garde still remains steeped in a language of masculinity. In B Ruby Rich's 1979 essay "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism", she declares dominant cinemas as "The Cinema of the Fathers" and the avant-garde as "The Cinema of Sons."¹⁵

Where then does the cinema of mothers and daughters fit? I would argue that Chantal Akerman, who had admittedly always been influenced by her own mother, embodies a feminist cinema that exists outside of both the dominant and experimental realms.

While Akerman meets some of the calls of feminist theorists from her decade, I would argue that she also pushes against their politics. For example, while Mulvey takes a feminist stance, she does so through a primarily patriarchal Framework, employing structures introduced by Freud and Lacan. Akerman's cinema is feminist specifically because it refuses to comply with tradition. Instead Akerman revolutionizes cinema by creating a novel framework through which it can be created and viewed.

¹⁵ B. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism" in *Chick Flicks*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 30.

CHANTAL AKERMAN'S BIOGRAPHY

It is important to frame Akerman's body of work within the context of her identity, as a Belgian, Jewish, and female, independent filmmaker. These identities, the first three of which emerge directly from her biography, and the second two of which I also identify, will inform Akerman's approach to filmmaking and her subject matter. Her designation as an independent filmmaker speaks more to her institutional placement within the film industry. However, I would argue that this marker also arises from, and reinforces her position as, a Jewish, Belgian woman, since these identities emerge as points of difference or otherness. Élisabeth Lebovici writes, "Otherness is a non-conformity Akerman lives, as a woman and a Jew."¹⁶ The idea of the other indeed informs Akerman's rich body of work. Concentrating on the boundaries between the self and other, including the boundary between filmmaker and viewer, Akerman subtly resists strict dichotomies and the reductiveness of categorization.

Chantal Akerman was born on June 6th 1950 in Brussels, Belgium, to two Holocaust survivors from Poland. Akerman was the eldest of two girls. Her mother, Natalia had survived years at the Auschwitz concentration camp, where Akerman's grandparents passed, but her mother always refused to discuss the experience with Chantal. Akerman's father spent the majority of World War II in hiding from Nazis. Akerman recalls reading her maternal grandmother's journal, the only family relic left after the Holocaust. She specifically notes one line written in 1919, "It's only in you,

¹⁶ Chantal Akerman, Interview by Élisabeth Lebovici, "No Idolatry and Losing Everything That Made You a Slave." *Mousse Magazine*, December 2011. <http://moussemagazine.it/chantal-akerman-elisabeth-lebovici-2011/>

dear diary, that I can confide my feelings and my grief, since I'm a woman!"¹⁷

Akerman's mother Natalia or Nelly always claimed that Chantal was her grandmother's heir. Akerman's grandmother was also an artist, who apparently painted huge images of women looking out at the viewer, an uncanny resemblance to Akerman's confrontational cinematic gaze.¹⁸

The filmmaker has also often stressed her close relationship with her mother. She has acknowledged that Natalia was often at the heart of her work and that she felt directionless, in her personal and professional life, after her death.¹⁹ Maternal imagery is prominent throughout Akerman's film, likely as a tribute to her own mother and an effort to articulate the form of her inspiration. Though Akerman was captivated by her own matrilineage she had no children of her own. In many ways, Chantal's films are her offspring.

Akerman's early aspirations to become a writer were displaced by a desire for a career as a filmmaker when she saw Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*. In a 2009 interview with The Criterion Film Collection she notes:

I was 15 when I saw *Pierrot le Fou*. I had no idea who Godard was. I'd only vaguely heard of 'auteur cinema.' I'd go to see a big hit like *La Grande Vadrouille* or Walt Disney movies just to have a good time, go out with friends, have some ice cream, but certainly not to be shaken up emotionally or see a work of art.²⁰

Though she has since claimed that she does not like the film as much as she once did, Akerman's important introduction to Godard's New Wave film demonstrated to her

¹⁷ Chantal Akerman quoting her Grandmother, Interview by Nicole Brenez, "Chantal Akerman the Pajama Interview" in *Lola Journal*, (2012). Online.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Alisa Lebow, "Identity Slips: The Autobiographical Register in the work of Chantal Akerman," in *FILM QUART* 70 no. 1 (Oakland: University of California Press Journals, 2016), 54-56.

²⁰ Chantal Akerman, "Chantal Akerman on *Pierrot le Fou*," (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2012) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCxr2x1-M3g>.

the medium's artistic capacity. Akerman's early aspirations to become a writer, reveal the influence of literature in her work and the comprehensiveness of her form.

After viewing Godard's film, Akerman soon became a passionate cinephile. Her early love of *Pierrot Le Fou* constructed the cinematic medium as a rich field, free from imposed boundaries of identity. Soon, she would attend the Belgian film school, Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle et Techniques de Diffusion (INSAS). But after a year, she dropped out of school to finance her first film, *Saute Ma Ville*. This short, low-budget, black-and-white production, which she paid for by selling stocks and working in an office, set the stage for Akerman's later projects, in which she explores images of women at home, their interpersonal relationships, and the intersections of their identities.

In 1968, after completing *Saute Ma Ville*, Akerman moved to Paris and then New York, in a journey made by many European-Jews before her. It was here that Akerman was introduced to Anthology Film Archives and became inspired by the work of avant-garde filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Michael Snow and Andy Warhol. She cites Babette Mangolte, a camerawoman with whom she would later often collaborate, as bringing her into this world she "hadn't known about, a world at the time very small, very covert."²¹ As early as *La Chambre*, viewers might recognize the influence of structural film in Akerman's oeuvre. Extended shots and meaningful repetition create images that oscillate between "abstraction and figuration". The structural film genre's embrace of experimentation offers a radical approach to the

²¹ Chantal Akerman, Interview with Nicole Brenez, "Chantal Akerman the Pajama Interview" in *Lola Journal*, (2012).

reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the screen, a relationship Akerman explored throughout her career.

Akerman made four short films during her time in New York. The first, *L'Enfant Aimé ou je Joue à Être une Femme Mariée* (1971), she has since called “a failure, a loss.”²² But a year later she completed *Hotel Monterey* (1972), an experimental documentary examining a run-down New York hotel and its residents. Only a day later she made *La Chambre*, a film that does feature in the body of my thesis. *Le 15/8* (1973) and *Hanging out Yonkers* (1973), neither of which are included in my examination and the latter of which has since been lost, were Akerman’s last films made in New York. In a 2011 interview, at the Venice Film Festival, Akerman laughed at a memory of financing her New York films with money she had stolen from the 55th Street Playhouse, a gay porn cinema in Manhattan, where she worked as a cashier.²³

When she returned to Belgium in 1974, Akerman created the focus of this thesis, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* and a year later presented her most popular work, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*. The next year she shifted registers, making the documentary ode to her mother and New York City, *News from Home*. She says of the film, “I love it. Still not free from my mother.”²⁴ In 1978 Akerman made *Les Rendez-Vous D’Anna*, transitioning back into a more narrative, albeit still experimental, form. Though I do not go into detail here about Akerman’s work from

²² Ibid.

²³ Chantal Akerman, “A Conversation with Chantal Akerman,” *Celluloid Video* (October 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUSTWsegZ0k>

²⁴ Chantal Akerman, Interview with Nicole Brenez, “Chantal Akerman the Pajama Interview” in *Lola Journal*, (2012).

the 1980s, these years were a period of diverse experimentation for the filmmaker, in documentary, narrative and avant-garde genres.

My thesis picks back up again with Akerman in 1996, when she makes *A Couch in New York*. She claims that she made the film to please her father, who never wanted her to be a filmmaker out of fear that she would be overwhelmed. A relatively unusual commercial film for Akerman, she intended *A Couch in New York* as a means of bringing in money to satisfy her father. But the film was met with lukewarm reviews. The *New York Times*' Janet Maslin claims "once the film moves past its initial vapidness, it takes on a reasonably blithe aura of romance. Still, nothing, from the film's mischievous notions about psychoanalysis to its ideas of culture shock, has much weight. Coming from Ms. Akerman, this is pleasant but unaccountable fluff."²⁵ As I will discuss in later chapters, I still find this commercial work ripe with the impressive formal and thematic elements that defined the filmmaker's early career.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s Akerman would primarily work in the documentary genre. Her final film, *No Home Movie* (2015), posthumously pays homage to her mother, presenting the two, and sometimes Akerman's sister Sylvaine, eating and sharing memories. In her later years, Akerman also began working with gallery installations. Asked about her formal shift in an interview with Alaina Claire Feldman, Akerman refutes ever having changed mediums and instead emphasizes, "I do films. I do writings. I do installations. I do whatever pleases me at the moment."²⁶ But then she acknowledges:

²⁵ Janet Maslin, "Sweet and Sour; a Romantic Blend," *The New York Times* (November 1977), <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/19/movies/film-review-sweet-and-sour-a-romantic-blend.html>

²⁶ Chantal Akerman, Interview by Alaina Claire Feldman, "Artists at Work: Chantal Akerman" in *Afterall Journal*, (April 2013).

In the 1990s, Kathy Halbreich asked me to make an installation at the Walker Art Museum. At the time I didn't even know what an installation was; it was just another opportunity to make a film... So it happened in a way by chance. And then it was such a pleasure to discover something else; it was much freer than making a movie.²⁷

The ease with which Akerman traverses the landscape of literature, film and the plastic arts indicate both her immense talent and her desire to evade simple definition. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* emerges early in her filmography, right after she returned to her native Belgium and right before her iconic *Jeanne Dielman*. But the themes, techniques and imagery established in this revolutionary film about identity and interiority pervade Akerman's work from its inception in 1968 until her final film in 2015.

On October 5th, 2015 the world lost a brilliant and creative mind. On this day, Chantal Akerman committed suicide in Paris, at the age of 65 years. By that point, she had suffered for several years with manic-depression. Following the death of her mother Nelly, with whom Akerman was extremely close, Akerman was said to be in a dark emotional state, suffering multiple breakdowns.²⁸ She left behind a rich body of over 40 works and an endlessly fascinating interpretation of the power of cinema and the shifting bounds of the self.

JE, TU, IL, ELLE

Je, Tu, Il, Elle paints a portrait of a Julie, a woman living in a small urban apartment in Brussels. The film is separated into three distinct sections, divided spatially, temporally and thematically. The first begins in the bare confines of Julie's apartment. In

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rachel Donadio and Cara Buckley, "Chantal Akerman, Whose Films Examined Women's Inner Lives, Dead at 65," *The New York Times* (October, 2015), https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/07/arts/chantal-akerman-belgian-filmmaker-dies-65.html?_r=0

the second, Julie hitchhikes with a truck driver, stopping at bars, restaurants and a bathroom along the way. The third segment takes place at a former lover's apartment. The viewer is left to speculate as to what the relationship between the segments might be.

In the first section, the film's protagonist Julie, whose name we only learn in the rolling credits at its conclusion, spends nearly a month in her studio apartment, rearranging furniture, repainting the walls, sleeping, eating sugar, writing a mysterious letter, and dressing and undressing. This section might be understood as the period of isolation or psychological interiority. The second section might stand for the time of the other. Julie meets a truck driver, who picks her up off the highway. They eat at roadside restaurants and bars, have a casual sexual encounter and stop in a bathroom. In the final third, Julie goes to what seems to be a female ex-lovers house. At first the woman refused Julie's sexual advances, but eventually she makes her famished guest several sandwiches and the women have sex. This section might be read as the time of the relationship.

Je, Tu, Il, Elle's reflexive

tendency is first depicted in the film's title card, which presents the title's singular conjunctions in loopy cursive writing. The cursive letters are reminiscent of a school blackboard, perhaps associating the acquisition of



Figure 0.3 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

language with the learning of sexual difference. Indeed, the film's "personal pronouncements" address the notion of authorship, that is central to both Akerman's work and the project of feminist filmmaking as a whole. Immediately, Akerman creates,

and interrogates, the tension between internal and external, subject and object, and author and character.

The title card situates “Je” and “Tu” on their own lines, while “I” and “Elle” appear side by side. “Je,” “Tu,” and “I” all occupy the left column, while “Elle” stands on its own in the right column. The title’s format associates the pronouns “I” and “You” with “He”, suggesting that viewers typically align themselves with the male perspective. The matching of the “He” and “She” likely refers to the gender binary that dominates both lived, as well as enacted, experiences. And “Elle” might be interpreted as being at odds with the subject of other identity forms. Or its independence might assert the potential for new and unique “feminine” representations and ways of identifying with images on screen.

CHAPTER 1 - JE

*“I don’t feel I belong anywhere. On the contrary, I have the feeling that I am only attached to the land under my feet. And even there the ground is often a bit shaky.”*²⁹

The first part of the film might correspond with the title’s “Je” or “I.” Akerman’s character is physically alone for most of the section’s duration, isolated in her studio apartment, with only minimal furnishings to fill the space. The minimalist aesthetic of this first section, and its focus on minute yet repetitive tasks, captures the subject’s sense of stasis and seclusion. During the film’s first third, Julie’s only connection comes from the letter she frantically writes and rewrites and her encounter with a shadowy figure who passes by her window, only for a moment.

As she writes the letter, which could be a possible reference to the “Tu” of the film’s title, Akerman becomes increasingly manic. She eventually crosses most of the note out then lays her writing out, tacking it down to the floor boards. She spends most of the rest of her duration in the apartment rearranging furniture. Without any clear motivation, the task seems tedious and redundant. Her time in the apartment is abstracted by the repetition of her seemingly arbitrary actions. Like *Jean-Dielman, Je, Tu, Il, Elle* presents a woman trapped, both by her self-imposed confinement indoors and her meaningless routine.

Abstracted Sound and Image

In the film’s first shot, Julie, played by Akerman herself, sits in a chair, facing away from the camera. But the voiceover describes an entirely different scene. Akerman pronounces, “And so I left. A tiny white room...on the ground floor...as narrow as a

²⁹ Chantal Akerman quoted by Jon Davis, “Every Home a Heartache” in *C Magazine* 130 no. 1, (Santa Monica: C Publishing LLC, 2016).

corridor...where I lie motionless and alert...on my mattress.” For about the next thirty minutes of the film, Akerman does indeed lay intermittently on a bare mattress in a stark apartment. Interspersed with these shots of Akerman’s quiet contemplation on her apartment floor, are images of her writing and rewriting letters, devouring sugar out of a brown paper bag, and stripping in front of a glass door.

At times, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*’s voiceover matches the image. At others it predicts it. Ivone Margulies articulates that the films’ abstractive powers, which designate through verbal language “both small and large units of diegetic time – moments, days, the menstrual cycle”³⁰ arbitrarily connect to the visual track, creating a sense of temporal abstraction. Abstract temporal space informs much of Akerman’s work. In her 1972 short *La Chambre* for example, a calendar sits prominently next to the mirror, and is panned over several times, multiplying its effect. And Akerman’s most iconic film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* depicts its protagonist in real time, amplifying the tedious rhythm of her days. In fact, Akerman says that Michael Snow’s *La Région Centrale*, a film that features random camera movements across an empty landscape, opened her mind to “the relationship between film and your body” and “time as the most important thing in film.”³¹

Ivone Margulies’ claim, that Akerman seeks to convey temporal abstraction, is supported by Akerman’s clear interest in time, demonstrated both by *mise en scène* and the temporal structure of her films. But I would extend Margulies’ assertion, to claim that *both* the visual and audio tracks are abstracted in time as in space. Read from a

³⁰ Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 115.

³¹ Chantal Akerman, Interview with Nicole Brenez, “Chantal Akerman the Pajama Interview” in *Lola Journal*, (2012)

theoretical feminist film perspective, this abstraction might signify Akerman's interest in dismantling the narrative structure tied to patriarchal order.

This abstraction is reflected just as much in content as in form. For example, the four pronouns of the film's title, "Je," "Tu," "Il," and "Elle," carry out shifting functions. "Je" might roughly correspond with the film's first section, "Il" to the second, and "Elle" to the third. While "Tu" becomes a floating signifier. But as a film reliant on ambiguity, such a literal reading might diminish its power. To begin to understand the film's complexity I would suggest that viewers read for a multiplicity of interpretations. In other words, we must abandon the assumption that *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* has a definitive interpretation and instead embrace the notion that its meaning is re-created upon each viewing. Thus, the nebulous boundary between the title's identifiers and the necessity of audience interpretation, interrogates the divisions between the self and other, in a way that is essential to challenging the "male gaze".

Mirrors as Tools of Abstraction

Akerman uses mirrors as another tool of abstraction. In the film's first shot, Akerman sits in a chair on the right side of the room, facing the wall, with what appears to be a checkered table cloth in front of her. To her left a wire framed bed divides her from a dresser, which sits in the far-left corner of the room. And on top of the dresser sits what appears to be a mirror, with a photograph stuck in its bottom most curve. But the mirror only reflects a grey oval shape of blankness. The shot fades to black and, when Akerman's room reappears in the next shot, the furniture in the room is completely rearranged. The orientation of the room is transformed, making the space even more ambiguous for the viewer. In the first shot, the camera captured the room from the left

side looking onto the bed, the dresser, and Akerman facing the right wall. In the second shot, the camera looks onto the back wall from the front side of the room, and only the left corner of the right side of the room stays in the frame. The bed now sits to the left side of the back wall, tucked into an oddly shaped corner. Even further to the left, a hint of light enters the room.

The third shot maintains a similar orientation to the second. Only now the bed cuts across the center of the frame and Akerman gazes directly at the camera and the viewer. Akerman has noted that her filmmaking always considers the other as the face of the viewer and understands “that making films is very much about frontality, about facing off.”³² The protagonist’s recognition of the camera interrogates the traditional filmic gaze and diminishes the boundary between viewer and viewed. The frame is also slightly

shifted to the right, so less light enters the frame. And now the mirror and dresser from the first shot sit in the right corner of the frame. In the world of the film, the dresser is actually in its exact location from the first shot. But before the camera



Figure 1.1 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

captured the mirror from across the room. Now the camera is situated adjacent to the wall against which the dresser is located.

³² Chantal Akerman, Interview by Élisabeth Lebovici, “No Idolatry and Losing Everything That Made You a Slave.” *Mousse Magazine*, December 2011. <http://moussemagazine.it/chantal-akerman-elisabeth-lebovici-2011/>

In addition to the shifted orientation of the room, the mirror is also somehow different from its initial appearance. Now, with the photo removed from the bottom of the oval, the mirror seems to be no more than a cutout. Within its borders, we see a gray upper half and a white bottom half, which line up exactly with the two-toned wall behind it. This new look at the object suggests that the mirror does not reflect the wall across from it, but is rather an empty hole, revealing the wall behind it. Akerman, a magician of ambiguity, might use this visual “game” of the mirror to remind viewers that what we see is not always a reflection of reality. What we might at first assume is a mirror image actually turns out to be a one-way view of the wall beyond the dresser’s frame.

Akerman’s subtle hint, that the mirror is not a reflective surface but rather a transparent one, has major thematic implications in her film and the rest of her body of work. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* is a film about identity: Akerman’s identity, her lover’s identity, the viewers identity, and the places where these identities blur and merge. While it is true that a mirror is a reflection of the self, it does not reflect the self in its truest form. The mirror warps. Mirror images for example appear almost identical, but the image is actually reversed perpendicularly to the surface. Small differences in lighting and angle can also drastically change one’s reflection. And one’s appearance certainly does not remain constant from one reflective surface to the next. Unlike a typical mirror, which distorts reality, the “trick mirror” in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* is transparent. It is more like a window then, to be looked through, than a mirror to reflect back.

In Akerman's *La Chambre*, another "trick" mirror recognizes the camera's authorial presence. By trick mirror, I mean a mirror that presents an illusion, or at first appears as one thing but subtly reveals itself as another. For the first three rotations, we see no mirror above the bed. But in the



Figure 1.2 Source: Akerman, *La Chambre*, 1975

penultimate rotation we get a glimpse of the bottom half of a mirror. Its curved form is reminiscent of the trick mirror in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*. Then, in the final rotation we detect a presence reflected back to us. This presence is Babette Mangolte, the camerawoman. By acknowledging her presence, Akerman points to the performativity of the film. Her reflection also visualizes an important fact: that the person behind the camera is a woman. In choosing to use, and show, a female camera woman, Akerman disturbs one facet of the male gaze: the male creator.

In Akerman's first film, *Saute Ma Ville*, discussed in more detail later in this chapter, mirrors serve as a device for self-awareness and a metaphor for the beautification process. The film, which critiques the construction of femininity, employs the mirror as a reflection of Akerman's gendered condition and its eventual destruction. The first reflection we see is of Akerman's character sitting on the floor. She appears uncertain, as if she has not decided whether or not she should actually fulfill her suicidal plans. But she breaks the gaze and continues to tape up the windows, refusing to be swayed by societal

expectations. The second reflection shows her dancing, rubbing lotion on her face and laughing madly. This time, when she sees her reflection, she looks directly at the camera and thus the audience. She slaps herself and illegibly writes something on the mirror. It is as if she is disgusted by her submission to the mirror. The last time, she ignores the mirror entirely and instead walks over to the stove, where she turns on the gas. But we see the entire scene through the mirror's reflection. The hiss of gas and the crackle of paper on fire occupy the soundtrack, as the gas pours into the closed off room. This time, Akerman has broken free from the mirror's influence and is finally able to blow up the conventions that gave the mirror its symbolic power. Of course, she destroys herself in the process. The sound of repeated explosions continues over the black



Figure 1.3 Source: Akerman, *La Chambre*, 1975

screen and are eventually overtaken by the eerily cheerful sound of Akerman's hums.

Isolation and Objectification

The cutout mirror in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* is in some ways a reflection of the character's condition. An aspect of the protagonist Julie's reality is indeed the walls that confine her. If Julie were to look into the empty cutout "mirror," which she never in fact does, she would notice the reality of her environmental detachment. Perhaps she never looks into this mirror because she is so trapped within her own isolation that it has become a part of her. After all, the only window that we see in this early shot, the trick mirror, does not

look outside. It looks only at the walls that keep her inside. The accompanying audio track tells viewers that Julie has been trapped in this single “tiny white room...on the ground floor...as narrow as a corridor...” for days on end. She has become so enmeshed by her interior space that she almost exists as part of it.

In the next shot, Julie moves a table and dresser off screen, presumably out of the room, and collapses on her bed. As she moves the table, the camera tracks her movement, panning across the room too. This tracking shot helps to situate the subject within her environment, which was previously abstracted by camera positioning and the continuous



rearrangement of objects on screen. Akerman ducks her head beneath the table she moves. The darkness, where her hair meets the collar of her shirt, blends into the dark wood table, making it difficult to differentiate between Akerman and the table she moves. Then she stands up and moves a dresser. This time her black pants blend in with the darkly colored dresser and again she merges with the furniture she moves off screen. This sequence offers another suggestion that Julie has become so trapped within her space that she has become another object within in.

Akerman’s preoccupation with spatial interiority can be traced all the way back an earlier project, *La Chambre*, filmed with Babette Mangolte. During *La Chambre*’s silent ten minute and twenty-four second run time, the camera pans, offering a 360-degree

view of a small room and paying careful attention to the room's furnishings and an arresting Akerman. In light of the mother's influence and perpetual presence in Akerman films, this and every other room she depicts, takes on the characteristics of the womb. The camera begins on a wooden upholstered chair then pans counterclockwise to various household objects, including a table with food, a kettle on the stovetop, and an old wooden chest. Then it passes by Akerman, lying in bed, to a cluttered spinning wheel and desk, and then on to a dish rack, some hanging hosiery, and a calendar, with a sink situated below. The camera finally returns to its point of origin and begins its second rotation.

As the camera pans, Akerman lays in bed, changing positions between staring back at the viewer, rocking from side to side, holding, then devouring an apple, and finally rubbing her eyes. The panning movement and proximity of the camera to its inanimate subjects obscures their form, while the repetition of the camera's movements allows the viewer to consistently observe the object's details. This interaction between still objects and a camera in motion pushes the boundaries of what narrative film entails. Akerman reflects on her first experience viewing Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971) and *Back and Forth* (1969), two clearly influential films for *La Chambre* in terms of its use of motion and space, saying:

The sensory experience I underwent was extraordinarily powerful and physical. It was a revelation for me, that you could make a film without telling a story. And yet the tracking shots of <-----> (*Back and Forth*, 1969) in the classroom, with movements that are purely spatial while nothing is happening, produce a state of suspense as tense as anything in Hitchcock. I learned from them that a camera movement, just a movement of the camera, could trigger an emotional response as strong as from any narrative.³³

³³ Chantal Akerman, Interview by Élisabeth Lebovici, "No Idolatry and Losing Everything That Made You a Slave." *Mousse Magazine*, December 2011. <http://moussemagazine.it/chantal-akerman-elisabeth-lebovici-2011/>

La Chambre's tracking shots provide viewers with a sensory experience that not only triggers emotion, but also encourages a sort of political awareness and engagement. The camera's panning movement creates a feminist stance through its circular composition and its unique method of "diegetic exhibition."³⁴ By rejecting traditional montage form and sequential editing, Akerman destabilizes progress-oriented narratives. The broad and comprehensive orbit that the camera makes refuses to maintain its focus on any one object or perspective, embracing plurality and resisting any sort of fixed authorial or spectatorial gaze.

It could be argued that a circular structure reflects the circulation of the female figure as commodity, and thus defeats a feminist stance. In Laura Mulvey's 2014 essay on Max Ophüls' *Lola Montès* (1955) she suggests that the mechanical production of sound and image "invests in the woman as spectacle and her circulation as commodity, as the point of 'attraction' that sells a movie to its public," implying a sense of desire that relies on the "psychoanalytic within the economic structures of commodity capitalism."³⁵ I would argue that *La Chambre* gestures towards circularity, not to embody Hollywood's reproduction of femininity as a commodity, but rather to create a broader range of schemas and ways of looking. Specifically, the camera's continuous scanning motion creates a sense of non-distinction between animate and inanimate objects, except through the animate subject's slight movements and the cinematographer's gestures seen through the mirror.

³⁴ Alice Blackhurst, "The Camera Glides, but Never Settles," *A Nos Amours Screening Collective* (2015) <http://anosamoursblog.weebly.com/blog/the-camera-glides-but-never-settles>

³⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Compulsion to Repeat: Max Ophüls's *Lola Montès*," *Afterall Journal* 35 (2014): 90.

As the camera moves in these circular motions, intermittently reversing directions, the household objects come to viewers like a still life. And Akerman is an apparent and integral part of this portrait. *La Chambre*'s light-bathed mise en scène is reminiscent of a still life or renaissance painting, with Akerman posing as another fixture among her household items. Historically, the typical viewer of visual art has been male. In Renaissance figure painting, which spanned from around 1300 to 1600, canvases were painted with objects like fruit, jewels, and other expensive belongings, in an effort to prove that the painting's owner, almost always a man, could afford the decadent lifestyle depicted. Another common trend in Renaissance painting was the nude, which almost exclusively portrayed women. Thus, the Renaissance themes of ownership, property, power and wealth, coupled with the popularity of nude images of the female form, suggest that these paintings were vehicles for masculine pleasure and a means of displaying their wealth via their wife's erotic display.

In his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger states that "according to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome -- men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at."³⁶ One of the most classic figures to create an ideological understanding of the feminine is the Italian painter Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534). The gestures and attributes of Venus' form function as a site for fantasy and fetishization. The goddess covers her genitalia with her hand. But rather than hiding her vagina, the hand actually draws the viewer's eye to the concealed point of focus. The subject's form is simplified as an object of masculine want, creating a male fantasy of the female form and neglecting the reality of women's bodily experience. The women of these paintings are consciously

³⁶ John Berger, "Section, 3" *Ways of Seeing*, (London: BBC Penguin Books, 1973): 46-47.

aware of their display, as evidenced through their direct gaze towards the viewer, their reclining position, a controlled expression, and the accompaniment of luxurious fabrics,³⁷ all characteristics that reflect Akerman's own position in *La Chambre*. By drawing this parallel to Renaissance painting, I do not propose that Akerman endorses the period's gaze. Rather, I believe that she embodies the subjects of these paintings to recognize typical readings of the female body and its continued objectification.



Figure 1.5 Source: Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1534



Figure 1.6 Source: Akerman, *La Chambre*, 1972

The only thing differentiating Akerman from her environment are the slight movements she makes in bed. The camerawork frames her household items with the same emphasis it frames its human subject's form. The camera begins on a wooden chair with red velvet upholstery, then rotates two full circles around the room, stopping at what seems to be the midway point of the pan length. There it reverses directions. It moves on, back past Akerman in bed, and then reverses directions to the left again. The camera stops at the same point as before and shifts to the right one last time. Then we see Akerman fiercely eat an apple and the camera pan a complete circle to the left.

³⁷ Kylie Krummel, "Defying the Male Gaze: On Depictions of Female Beauty from Renaissance Paintings to Modern Photography" *Boshmeia Magazine* <https://boshemiamagazine.com/2017/09/22/defying-the-male-gaze-on-depictions-of-female-beauty-from-renaissance-paintings-to-modern-photography/>

The apple that Akerman eats, as the camera pans around the room in its final orbit, might allude to Eve in her act of sin. In the bible, a foundational patriarchal narrative, the original woman is tempted by the serpent to share the forbidden fruit with Adam and is thus made responsible for the fall of mankind. Consequently, she becomes an explanation for the female condition. She was made the reason for menstrual suffering, labor pains, and acted as a cautionary tale of why women should comply with their husbands. Yet this biblical figure also represents the woman as a powerful threat.

Akerman's character in *La Chambre* does demonstrate some sense of authority as she gazes into the camera and as such might also be threatening to the power of the male gaze. Only towards the end of *La Chambre*, does the repetitive camera movement, become tight enough to keep Akerman in the frame for more than a second. But just as soon as it focuses in on her, it pulls away again, briefly scanning the room and then coming to a halt. We are left wondering who is the work's subject? What is the film's narrative intent? Or is it possible to have a cinema without either a subject or narrative structure?

As Laura Mulvey asserts, film and other visual arts tend to represent women from a heterosexual point of view and as the objects of male pleasure. Akerman plays with this notion, by representing women who become almost indistinguishable from the objects that surround them. But, while *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s Julie is clearly represented as one of the objects in the frame, she also actively moves the table and dresser, which complicates her relationship to these objects and Akerman's message about women's position on screen. The convention of female objectification, especially by the gaze of male viewers of film, is in many ways embodied by Akerman's character Julie. But the filmmaker also posits

the potential for female agency. She does this by capturing Julie's physical rearrangement of furniture and through Julie's gaze towards the camera, in an earlier shot. Akerman's *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* imagines a world in which women are both object and subject. A world that is much more dynamic and much more inclusive than the world that presently exists.

To Look and to Be Looked At

Once Akerman moves the furniture, she pushes her bed up against the wall and sits in the opposite corner of the room, where we see a small sliver of light enter the room, from what might be a window to the outside. The screen fades to black and again Akerman is absorbed into her surroundings. Two shots later, we see exterior brick and can confirm that the light did indeed come from a window to the outside. This is our first glance into a diegetic world outside of the four walls of her tiny apartment. Throughout the first third of the film, Julie continuously returns to this corner with the windowed door. It is as if she waits inside for some opportunity to abandon her confinement. But it is not until almost thirty minute later until she gathers the courage to actually do so.

The above scene demonstrates four levels of viewing: Julie's view, the outside world's view via the window, the audience's non-diegetic view, via the camera, and the camera person's view. Akerman's character is aware that she might be watched through the window in her apartment. At one point her suspicion is confirmed when we see a male figure, dressed in a trench coat, appear by the window for moment. So, she self-consciously stands in the corner, holding fabric over her chest, and gazing out the window, around the corner of the wall. But, because we, the viewers, also look at Akerman's character, she does not go unwatched, even as she hides behind the out cove in the corner of her room. Meanwhile, because Akerman stares back at the camera, she

too partakes in a role of active viewership. Julie's act of looking complicates the association between subject and object and obscures the boundary between spectator and subject. This gaze is further complicated by the fact that Akerman is both the author and subject of the film. She is both the writer and the written. This affords her filmic character some self-conscious awareness of being watched.

As Julie stands in the corner of the room, she gazes out of the window and away from the camera. Perhaps, her aversion of the camera's gaze means that she is aware of its existence in the room. At the very least, this circular gaze structure allows Julie some authority as an active onlooker. While the camera does look at Akerman, Akerman also looks out of the window and at times back at the camera. So, while she remains the object of the camera's gaze, her positioning gives her some power, to actively resist objectification and to play a more dynamic role in a normative subject-object relationship.

Earlier, in front of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s trick mirror, Julie gazes into the camera. Perhaps, in the same way that we look straight into the oval towards the wall, Akerman looks straight into the camera towards the audience. The trick subverts our expectations of reflections and thus reality, both Julie's and our own. In this shot, Akerman directly confronts one of the themes at the heart of the film: the relationship between subject and object. Not only are we observing Akerman, in her most intimate, interior space. We also are being observed *by* Akerman. All of Akerman's films, and especially *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* comment on this relationship between viewer and viewed. The films especially make a case for the objectification of women in films, at the hands of an actively gazing male.

Akerman is notorious for evading polarities, like subject and object or masculine and feminine. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s Julie, for example, seems to inhabit all four of the titular identities. In fact, her name contains an element of each of these pronouns. "J" is taken from "Je", "U" from "Tu", and "Lie" contains the letters for both "Il" and "Elle". Even the very three-part structure of her 1974 film avoids rigid dichotomies. Akerman says of herself "I am a woman, and I am Jewish; I'm a filmmaker, and I'm a writer, so you cannot just put me in one box." Similarly, you cannot put *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* in a box. While the film certainly deals with issues of female objectification, it also posits the potential for alternative modes of looking. In all of her films, Akerman refuses to present us with a representative situation or embodiment. Her clear opposition to predefined categories or identities allows for an ambiguous depiction of the self that questions normative visual and narrative spectatorship.

Nudity

Though Julie exists at an ambitious border of sexual classification, her body type epitomizes a stereotypical female form. For over half of the first third of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, Akerman is filmed in nude. Towards the end of the first third of the film is one of the most exaggerated displays of her body. As it presumably gets dark outside, Julie's studio



Figure 1.7 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

fills with pools of shadows. All we can see is letters sprawled across the floor and the square lines of the door frame, projected in shadow across the room. Then she stands up and her shadow becomes visible against the white wall, so that now her silhouette and shadow appear as two entities, standing next to each other. As she walks to the left, the details of her form become more recognizable, particularly her breast. Then she walks forward, off screen, towards the door. But her shadow remains visible for a moment longer. She quickly walks back onto screen, lays down and her figure again pools into darkness. Then she and her shadow crawl across the floor. The silhouette of her breast is extremely pronounced against the white wall, emphasizing her feminine figure. Then she lays on the floor, amongst the sprawled letters, and eats spoonfuls of sugar for nourishment in the dark.

In *News from Home*, filmed two to three years after *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, we notice a faint ode to Julie's sugar feast, when a nondescript man is seen pouring a mass of sugar into his coffee. He pours the canister for over thirteen seconds. The raw sugar is pure energy, which is quick but short-lived. The sweetness of the snack and its ability to cause fat storage further emphasizes the voluptuousness of Akerman's form and suggests some sort of



Figure 1.8 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

craving for sweetness. The following shot then cuts to Akerman, slumped against the bathroom wall. The curves of her body look even more pronounced in contrast to the straight lines that frame the shot. In fact, nothing in the room, except her body, shows any curvature.

Akerman's nudity, unlike the nudity characteristic of Hollywood films, or more overtly in pornography, does not fetishize her form, even as it accentuates it. As we will later learn in the film's third section, the letters upon which Julie lays might be an address to a former female lover. If her nudity is intended for anyone, this shot attaches it to a female recipient. While this recipient might have a different form than Akerman, her anatomical makeup is the same, and thus does not incite voyeuristic impulses. The use of silhouette and shadows also draws on Akerman's concern with the visible. According to feminist film scholars, film's unique ability to construct dynamic visual representations of the world has reinforced and revised long-enduring objectification of the female body. By obscuring certain features of her form and introducing others more as artistic elements than erotic details, Akerman questions the typical use of the female body in film. Her body is intimately represented. And as the filmmaker, it is represented in her own terms, not for the pleasure of the spectator. It is not part of a show, but rather a moment of deep psychological and bodily interiority.

Domesticity

The interior has long been designated as a female space. In the most basic sense, the inside of the home is the place of domestic activities. At the time of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle's* production domestic activities were geared towards, if not almost entirely restricted to, women. Female domesticity has upheld women's dependence on men and relegated them

to an existence of inaction anywhere but inside of the home. The strict gendered notions about what defined men's, as opposed to women's, work in the 1960s certainly informed Akerman's preoccupation with domestic confinement. In her earlier *La Chambre* for example, hanging laundry, a tea kettle and sink, and prepared breakfast all denote domesticity. While men were expected to leave the home in search of physical or mental labor, women were expected to maintain the household, cook, clean, and take care of familial needs. Akerman's *Jean Diehlman, 23 quai du Commence, 1080 Bruxelles*, candidly depicts such an existence. Its titular character holes up in her claustrophobic Brussels apartment, completing her "womanly" tasks with a learned precision. She cooks, cleans, and takes care of her son's needs. But, eventually she becomes unnerved by the monotony of her existence.

In Akerman's first film, *Saute Ma Ville*, the heroine's existence is also contextualized by domestic isolation. An 18-year-old Akerman stars as the principle role in this tragicomedy, in which a routine domestic evening rapidly descends into suicide by gassing, a poignant reference to her Eastern European-Jewish ancestry. In light of Akerman's real life suicide, decades later, this conclusion takes on an even more tragic tone. The film begins with several establishing shots of an urban environment. The camera tilts up to capture a high-rise apartment, emphasizing the protagonist's cramped urban living quarters. Mapping herself onto the city landscape, the soundtrack combines Akerman's humming and the revving engines of cars. Perhaps the humming represents the protagonist's solitude and confinement, a distraction from her menial tasks. The protagonist frantically enters the building with flowers. She retrieves her mail, in another allusion to letters, and, when the elevator doesn't come quickly enough, rushes up the

stairs. Shots of her running up the stairs interspersed with shots of the elevator ascending elude to the characters increasing restlessness.

She enters the apartment and locks the door, literally entrapping herself in the home. And on the back of her door, a poster of a Smurf reads “Go Home!” Then, as the protagonist begins to prepare dinner, the word “scotch” repeats itself on the soundtrack. At first the word only seems to be another gibberish sound. But we will soon learn that “scotch” actually reflects the short film’s primary ambition. Scotch means to decisively put to an end, to smash, or to destroy. As Akerman continues to perform household duties this word garners a new meaning: the destruction of domesticity and the performativity of gender. Of course, scotch also might refer to cellophane tape. This reading becomes quite literal as the protagonist tapes the door frame closed, sealing it off and further separating herself from her exterior, in preparation to fill her apartment with deadly gas.

Akerman portrays her ultimate suicide as just another mundane ritual, akin to any other household task. She makes dinner, mops the apartment and polishes her shoes, all while preparing for her suicide. Her feminist stance emerges as evident in the shoe polishing scene. At first, she polishes just her shoe, then her sock, and then her entire leg.

Refusing to stay
within the lines,
Akerman’s clumsy
polishing references
her refusal to conform
to the routines and
structures in place for



Figure 1.9 Source: Akerman, *Saute Ma Ville*, 1968

a woman of the time. As she polishes her shoes, a medium-close up shot frames Akerman so that she appears almost like a doll in a dollhouse. The shot cuts off half of the apartment door, and her figure seems huge in comparison to the cramped apartment, only made more minute through close framing. This and other household rituals, like mopping the floor, are hyperbolized with Akerman's large, awkward movements. The Chaplain-like performance of these tasks reflects the performativity of her femaleness.

Taken in conjunction with Akerman's later *Jean Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* and her earlier *Saute Ma Ville*, the first part of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* can certainly be read as a commentary on female domesticity. But as a film focused on the ambiguity of identity, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* does not make such a clear remark on the relationship between woman and interior entrapment. As previously mentioned, the film's protagonist spends the first third of the film only within the four walls of her apartment. In this section Julie repeats the same activities, with only slight modifications. She rearranges furniture, obsessively writes and rewrites a letter, and eats a peculiar snack of sugar. Meanwhile artificial snow falls visibly outside, reflecting the sugar Akerman consumes, and taunting her inability to leave the confinement of her room. The repetition, especially the writing and rewriting of the mysterious letters, obscures the viewer's sense of time and space and seemingly abstracts Julie's as well. While she does keep count of the days spent in her studio apartment, nothing except for external cues of light and darkness separates one day from the next. Her life is only a repeating series of domestic vignettes and her boredom with it all is palpable.

Letters to the Mother, the Lover and the Self

One of Julie's only connections in the film's first section comes in the form of a mysterious letter, which she writes and rewrites. Letters figure prominently in Akerman's films throughout her career, especially as an ode to the mother and more broadly to the symbiotic relationship between women. In *News from Home*, a 1977 avant-garde documentary, long takes of New York City landscapes are set to a voiceover of Akerman reading letters from her mother, sent between 1971 and 1973. As noted in the introduction, Akerman moved to New York City in November of 1971 at the age of 21, where she was introduced to influential experimental filmmakers, including Babette Mangolte, who would later become one of Akerman's recurring collaborators. According to Akerman, she spent her time in New York living "like a vagabond...going from one bed to another bed," a sentiment captured by the worried tone in her mother's letters. The letters that form the basis of the soundtrack were written to Akerman during her first move to New York but not read by the director until she returned in 1976.

The mother's letters in *News from Home*, which incur no response from Akerman, allow for a possible retrospective reading of the letters in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* as messages back to the mother. While at first, we might assume their intended recipient is the lost female lover of the third act, we never hear the letter's contents and thus cannot assume their address. At one point, Akerman tacks the letters to the floor. Crawling off screen she places some of these letters beyond the viewer's field of vision, inviting us to read beyond what is explicitly shown. By reading between texts, these letters might contain responses to *News from Home*'s unanswered letters. Julie writes, "I waited ... for something to happen. For me to believe in God or for you to send me some gloves to go

out in the cold.” These words clearly match the mother’s letters in *News from Home*, which continuously claim to send Akerman appropriate clothing and money.

The sugar, eaten almost manically as Julie writes and rewrites her letters, further informs this interpretation. At one point she crawls on top of the letters in fetal position, spooning sugar into her mouth. With its sweetness and energy, sugar might suggest a

desire for nurturance or a call for the comfort of the mother. Julie seems definitively isolated in film’s first segment. In line with my reading of the letters, this sense of



Figure 1.10 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

isolation might emerge out of separation from the mother. She continues to undress, perhaps returning to the state of newborn, a point in development when, presumably, the mother and daughter are intimately attached. I would argue that whether these letters are intended for the mother, the lover or the audience, the possible dual reading of the mother and the female lover speaks to Akerman’s interest in female relationships, originating with the first between mother and daughter.

The filming for *News from Home* didn’t happen until Akerman returned to New York city during the summer of 1976, three years after she had moved back to her Belgium hometown and recorded her notorious piece, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du*

Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. The locations shown in *News from Home* were chosen as sites that Akerman remembered walking past during her time during the early 1970's in New York, including the Time Square subway station, tenth avenue from 30th to 49th streets, Tribeca, and the Staten Island Ferry. The sound was only added to these images later.³⁸ This disconnect between Akerman's time spent living in New York and the later-recorded shots of city streets demonstrate a moment of personal reflection for Akerman and a sense of intimacy for its viewers. This is not the kind of intimacy of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, where viewers see Akerman's nude body. Rather the sort of intimacy viewers experiences in *News from Home* comes from seeing and hearing the same things that Akerman does, and revisiting a distinct moment of independence for her, both personally and artistically.

The perspective that Akerman creates for viewers, through long scenic shots and an audio track of personal letters, allows them to stand in her place, questioning the boundaries of subject, creator, and consumer. The letters received from Akerman's mother detail her domestic concerns and overwhelming parental anxiety. The mother writes to her daughter about the family's health, family engagements, menopause, and arrangements for sending Chantal money and summer clothes. Akerman's own detached composition, in the form of long takes and little camera movement, contrast the intimacy of the mother's letters, which seem intended to provoke guilt in her daughter. But by absolving herself from their intimate tone, Akerman maintains her independence. One letter reads "I'm beginning to get depressed but as long as you're happy that's the main thing." At this moment, the ambient noise of traffic heightens, drowning out the mother's

³⁸ Melissa Anderson, "Her Brilliant Decade" *Moving Image Source*, January 2010.
<http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/her-brilliant-decade-20100119>

voice. It seems that this suppression is necessary for the daughter to maintain her distance. Without any response from Akerman, these letters seem just as intended for the viewer as the director herself. The tension between ours and Ackerman's discovery of the city, and the perpetual and increasingly anxious letters from home invite the viewer deeper into Akerman's own experience as an outsider in a new city.

At first the camera is static, observing the city's streets and inhabits with a curious view. But then it moves to the subway and eventually through Hell's Kitchen in a moving car. As the pace quickens city sounds grow louder. Film critic Nicholas Elliott writes "Sometimes the thrum of motors and rattle of subway cars overcome the voice reading the letters, as if New York were taking over, blotting out the past, the personal, the other place."³⁹ But by the film's conclusion, the pandemonium of metal in motion is overtaken by the sound of the Hudson river's splashing waves. The final shot, taken from the Staten Island Ferry as it leaves

lower Manhattan, brings to mind images of all of the immigrants, like Akerman, who have entered America through this and other ports. Jonathan Rosenbaum claims "This is one of the best depictions of the alienation



Figure 1.11 Source: Akerman, *News From Home*, 1977

of exile that I know."⁴⁰ As the Twin Towers recede behind the camera, we experience a

³⁹ Nicholas Elliott, "Chantal Akerman's News from Home" *Bomb Magazine*, January 2014, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/chantal-akermans-news-from-home/>

simultaneous push towards the new world and a pull back to the comfort of the motherland and the literal mother.

Cyclical Time as Women's Time

Until *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s second section, Julie's confinement seems unending. As she lies almost motionless on the mattress, in a pool of darkness, the voiceover reads "I realized I'd been there for at least 28 days," a possible reference to the length of a menstrual cycle. By measuring time in this way, Akerman might be referring to an imagined matriarchal system of time. If so, this system seems to extend indefinitely, subverting the linearity of Western notions of time. In the West, time traditionally flows from past, to present, to future. But in Akerman's films, time is more cyclical. Akerman creates a feminist mode of time by making its duration palpable. She says:

When people are enjoying a film, they say 'I didn't see the time go by' ... but I think that when time flies and you don't see time passing by you are robbed of an hour and a half or two hours of your life. Because all you have in life is time... With my films you're aware of every second passing through your body.⁴¹

The sense of duration seems to apply as much to Julie's character as to the audience.

In Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time," the Belgian-French philosopher, literary critic and feminist considers how the three waves of feminism differ in their conception of time. She rejects all but the final wave, which she expects to be less of a feminist, and more of a humanist, movement. The first generation, she says, was concerned with women's place within the "national problematic." This phase conceived of, and sought to gain a place within, a linear time. The second phase analyzed women's relationship to language and meaning, in attempt to understand how women inhabit the "symbolic

⁴⁰ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "News from Home," February 1995.

⁴¹ Chantal Akerman in *Chantal Akerman: From Here*, Gustavo Beck and Leonardo Luiz Ferreira (Brooklyn: Icarus Films, 2015), Film.

denominator". The third phase, she proposes, will focus less on the identity of a whole sex, and rather the identity of the individual. The goal of this phase, and its non-linear conception of time, would be to separate from a socio-symbolic order and enter into the "very interior of every identity whether subjective sexual, ideological...along with the multiplicity of every person's possible identification."⁴² In other words, by creating a new, revolutionary signifying space, third wave feminists might articulate their own, broader definitions of identity, that both brings out the singularity of the individual and the multiplicity of every individuals possible identifications.

Departure

Julie's articulation of personal stasis simultaneously creates an idealized notion of cyclical time while also demonstrating the reality of female isolation. Towards the end of the first third, the voiceover track tells us "It snowed. I figure that in any case, life had to come to a halt...that nothing more would happen...and that I should wait for the snow to stop and then melt. It snowed for a very long time." And so, Julie's life comes to a halt for a very long time. The snow falls and outside the world happens around her. But her own life is static, and she is trapped by circumstantial female confinement. In this first third of the film, Julie tries desperately to create some sort of action, by moving the furniture, writing letters, and pacing throughout her studio apartment. But she just keeps returning to the corner by the window of the room, seemingly trying to break out. Akerman notes of herself, "I'm in a kind of strange situation: always liking my jail, loving my jail, and hating it, and fighting against it, but then, when it's getting too close to freedom, I'm afraid, and go back to my jail."⁴³ Usually when Julie returns to her

⁴² Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The University of Chicago Press* 7, no. 1 (1981), 28.

⁴³ Ibid.

corner, she is seen in shadow, suggesting that just as she gets close to leaving her confinement, she is erased, brought back into the dark isolation of her female space.

The idea of imprisonment is central to Akerman's work, not only as a commentary on female captivity, but also as a testament to her own family's history. Akerman's family moved to Brussels from Poland, where her parents had survived the Holocaust. Her mother and the great-aunt of her mother were in Auschwitz. Her grandmother and grandfather died there. She says "The jail thing is very, very present in all of my work...sometimes not very frontally. The jail is coming from the camps, because my mother was in the camps, and she internalized that and gave it to me."⁴⁴ Her mother's trauma left aftershocks with her daughter, Chantal, who would carry her family's imprisonment with her throughout her entire oeuvre. While *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* is not a direct reference to her family's horrific internment, its protagonist's urge for, and inability to, escape seems to come from a place of deep, inherited familial grief. Akerman's Jewish identity, clearly informs her stylistic and thematic choices and must be taken in conjunction with her female identity.

Towards the end of the film's first section, the camera cuts to one of the only medium-close up shots of the first section. In it Julie smirks into the camera, standing against a wall that is light on one side and dark on the other. Her black hair stands out against the white background. And she smirks at an ambiguous viewer. She peers at what could be the audience, a former lover, the camera, or herself. Then the shot cuts to Julie sitting with her head in her lap, on her bare mattress, facing towards the doors. From one

⁴⁴ Barbara McBane, "Talking, Talking, Singing, Exploding...and Silence: Chantal Akerman's Soundtracks." *Film Quarterly*, September 2016, <https://filmquarterly.org/2016/09/16/walking-talking-singing-exploding/>

shot to the next, the character goes from smirking in the center of the frame, to falling into the background, faceless, with her head in her lap. Then she sits up onto her knees and lifts her head. Her shadow grows with her, on the white wall to her right. And a faint silhouette of her black hair reflects in the mirror in front of her. She pulls back her hair as if she is looking at her reflection in the window, but her dark shirt and hair disallow any reflections in the windowed door. Then Julie stands up and gets closer to the mirror, as if trying to find herself in it. At one point, she gets so close to the door that the blackness of her button-down shirt pools into the reflection and all the window shows is darkness. It is not until she undresses that she and we, viewers, actually see any reflection.

Once Julie takes off her shirt, the lightness of her skin creates a reflection in the window. She gazes back at it, swaying between the window panes and checking her appearance from different angles, in an apparent display of self-consciousness. As Julie stands, looking at herself in front of the door, she both glances in the mirror back at

herself and shows herself to the outside world, through the clear glass of the door. The door's presence as both window and mirror represents a boundary that Akerman plays with



Figure 1.12 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

throughout the film, the boundary between inside and outside and between the self and the other. But while she argues for a blurring of boundaries between personal designations, she does recognize and comment upon the concrete ways in which womanhood defines the performance of identity. In this shot, Julie is literally only seen in the window's reflection when she is naked. Based on the presence of the man who walks by the same window a few shots earlier, Akerman seems to suggest that Julie can only ever see herself reflected in the portal through which a man sees her. In other words, her reflection in the outside world is primarily concerned with a man's observation of her womanly form.

CHAPTER 2 - IL

“For me the crucial issues are: no idolatry and losing everything that made you a slave.”⁴⁵

The second third of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* seems to continue directly after Julie’s departure from her flat. This section chronicles her encounter with a male truck driver, with whom she hitches a ride. It begins with a long shot of interlocking highway lanes and we can see Julie, scaled down to miniature from our perspective, presumably waiting

to flag a ride. The mise en scene is distinctly feminine. That is not to say that image of the highway is representative of all female forms but rather that it is representative of the stereotype of female



Figure 2.1 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

voluptuousness. The highway bends and loops, much like the prominent curves of Akerman’s body in the previous section. And framing the center lane are two hedges, evocative of female pubic hair. In the back-left corner of the frame, straight poles contrast the curves of the highway much like the horizontal and vertical lines in Julie’s bathroom only a few shots earlier, that emphasize her bodily curves. By feminizing the highway, the place where we soon meet the film’s next character, the truck driver, Akerman places

⁴⁵ Chantal Akerman, Interview by Élisabeth Lebovici, “No Idolatry and Losing Everything That Made You a Slave.” *Mousse Magazine*, December 2011. <http://moussemagazine.it/chantal-akerman-elisabeth-lebovici-2011/>

the film's female character outside of her traditionally domestic sphere and negates the perception that the road is only a masculine space.

The next scene cuts to the inside of the driver's truck. The space is darkly lit, awash with grainy image quality and dark shadows so that all that is visible is the white of his shirt and the brief flashes of passerby's cars. These shimmering flares are the only moments that counter the stillness of the shot. At first, the driver says nothing, except for telling Julie to lay down in the back of the bunk to rest. We see the glare of plastic on the sheet, and Julie lying motionless in the back. Unlike before, she occupies the frame's edge, while the male driver occupies the center of the frame. The camera cuts to a medium close up of her sleeping, the only light coming through a small window above her head. Even though we have departed from Julie's flat, the static silence of this shot seems to suggest that she has not fully emerged from her isolation into the world. Perhaps her powerlessness remains as a product of her male company.

A Woman in a Man's World

Chantal Akerman's depiction of stereotypical female versus male roles does not suggest that she believes in such gendered divisions, but that the disparate lived realities of women and men are palpable and always operative. In the next scene, Julie and the truck driver stop for a meal. The two are seated on the same



Figure 2.2 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

side of the checkered table, echoing the table cloth across from Julie in the film's first shot. As they drink in silence, Julie and the driver seem to be watching television, as evidenced by the driver's gaze and the soundtrack. Its amplified noise, featuring guns, cars, and other sounds reminiscent of an American action flick, contrast with Julie's own silence. The implied action movie playing in the background draws attention to the masculine construction of this roadside bar and clarifies Julie's discomfort in this space. Julie, dressed in black blends in to the dark wall behind her, while the driver stands out in his crisp white t-shirt. A strange white flap also sits on the table cloth in front of him but stops before reaching Julie's side of the table. As a man, he is visible to the outside world, while she remains unseen. Their waiter evidences this fact, as he approaches and only interacts with the driver. Meanwhile Julie fulfills her expected womanly duties, by serving the driver his food. The blocking and physical demarcation of light and dark demonstrate how the character's social realities sharply contrast.

Julie's encounter with the truck driver places her spatially and psychologically outside of the masculine realm. After eating, the driver and Julie drive to a roadside bar. The driver enters first and the camera pans with his movement, cutting Julie out of the shot. He introduces her to the men at the bar, but the framing and blocking again position Julie as an outsider in the all-male crowd. The scene is long and drawn out, and Julie seems uncomfortable throughout, standing with her hands on her hips behind the driver, while he converses with the other male patrons. As the only woman in the room, Julie exists on the fringes of their world, a world that seems to draw on the working-class male existence. When the driver gets Julie a drink, she struggles to finish it. Eventually, she places the unfinished beer on the counter, while he gulps his down in seconds.

At the next bar Julie and the driver go to, a medium close up clarifies this relationship. As they drink beer in front of a fish tank, the tank's bubbles, framed behind Julie's glass and seemingly fizzing out from her drink, draw attention to her full and his half-empty glass. The quickness with which he finishes the drink evokes a stereotypical



Figure 2.3 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

masculinity. And Julie's inability to do the same suggests a deeper inability to identify with his masculinity or the privilege of that identity. The two are even physically separated by a wooden column of the fish tank. To the left, Julie fades into the darkness of the underwater background and to the right, the driver is illuminated by a halo of light reflected above his head. She is pictured in the deep recesses of the sea, perhaps alluding female enclosure or to the Roman goddess Venus, the mythological mother of the Roman people, who represents love, desire, sex and fertility. The light framing the driver imagines him towards the surface of the ocean. She looks down uncertain, closing her body language off. But he sits up seemingly proud with a broad chest.

Beyond the Edge of the Frame

Perhaps the moment which provides the most insight into the relationship between Julie and the driver, and reveals his function in the film, is a few scenes later. In close-up we see the driver and hear him tell an off-screen Akerman "Move your

hand...slowly...Not so fast...Up and down.” While we cannot see Akerman we might presume that she is performing some sort of sexual act for him. He continues to instruct her, dictating her motions and detailing his own erotic pleasure. Meanwhile, she makes no assertion of her presence, other than through the driver’s displays of pleasure. The long take and framing, which cuts Julie out entirely, might reveal the man’s self-centered desires. Or, as is always the case with Akerman, the scene might offer a more enigmatic commentary.

While at first, we might understand the heterosexual relationship between Julie and the truck driver as one that prioritizes male pleasure, upon closer analysis, Julie’s off-screen framing might actually suggest an alternative reading, one that makes possible her self-satisfaction. Since Julie never appears on screen during this scene, it is possible that the driver’s erotic narration does not in fact describe his pleasure, but rather instructs Ackerman in achieving her own. He says, “Move your hand. Slowly. Not so fast. Up and down. Slowly at first, then a little faster.” These words could apply to male or female genitalia and thus could allude to Julie’s self-masturbation or her sexual service to the driver. He continues, “You obey but you’re afraid. You think it’s wrong...You can feel it coming.” These comments, especially his use of the pronoun “you,” provide even further evidence that Julie is the one experiencing pleasure. Only a moment later, in a vivid display of sexual fulfillment, the driver leans his head over the steering wheel. This shot supports my initial presumption, that Julie fulfills the man’s sexual drive, while being entirely concealed by the frame.

Yet, their sexual encounter also concludes with the driver saying, “it came in little waves.” Little waves might refer to his pleasure, but more likely to the female capacity

for multiple orgasms. The possible dual reading of this scene, and the ultimate inability to explicitly determine its events, suggests a certain ambiguity that pervades much of Akerman's work. Akerman's insistent displays of obscurity plays with the viewers expectations, in particular their presumed heteronormative expectations, to challenge the notion that gender necessitates distinct and complementary roles for men and women. In doing so she subverts the male gaze that dominates the film industry and the spectatorial pleasure it reserves for heterosexual men.

In Akerman's 1996 romantic comedy, *A Couch in New York*, a similar off-screen framing technique introduces Béatrice and later reveals a sexual attraction between her and Henry. This film is distinctly more in line with classical Hollywood cinema than Akerman's other films. Amy Taubin calls it "a flat-out commercial endeavor,"⁴⁶ and Jonathan Romney writes that "Akerman seems to have in mind the sort of brittle, urbane comedy that might once have starred Grant and Hepburn in the 1940s, or even Astaire and Hepburn in the 1950s."⁴⁷ Still, the opaque interiority of the characters makes a classically Akerman statement about the limited nature of both self-knowledge and knowledge of the other.

When we are first introduced to Béatrice, an elusive framing makes it appear as if Béatrice is involved in a sexual act,



Figure 2.4 Source: Akerman, *A Couch in New York*, 1996

⁴⁶ Amy Taubin "Too Late Smart," *Village Voice* 42 no. 40 (1977): 70.

<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=KEtq3P1Vf8oC&dat=19971007&printsec=frontpage&hl=en>

⁴⁷ Jonathan Romney, "Tepid Souffle of Love and Psychoanalysis Misfires Badly," *The Guardian* 2 (1996): 2.

when in reality she is only exercising. The newspaper she reads, in which comes across the ad for Henry's apartment, covers her face. She is flushed and out of breath. Only when she hears a knock on the door does Béatrice move the newspaper enough for us to realize that she is wearing clothes. She looks up to see where the knock came from and the title card appears in an image of the sky.

Henry and Béatrice's relationship begins with a house swap. He, a psychoanalyst, fed up with his patients, trades his apartment with her, a Parisian dancer. Henry's apartment is high-tech and spacious while Béatrice's is cramped and messy, a detail reminiscent of Akerman's earlier depictions of feminine and masculine spaces. The first time the two come in contact is when Henry poses as a patient for Béatrice, who has secretly taken over his professional psychiatric role. While at first, he intends to confront her, he keeps up the ruse as a patient, and unable to speak, the two utter "yes" back and forth for the duration of their session. For the majority of the scene Béatrice's "yes" accompanies images of Henry, lying on a crush blue velvet couch. He closes his eyes as she utters the phrase through dramatized breaths. The tone seems arousing for both characters. And while it might seem obvious that no sexual act has yet occurred, the intentionally concealed events make it impossible to conclude such a fact.

When Béatrice walks her client downstairs she says to him "That was just the first time. I mean that can happen. Of course, it can happen," referring to her inability to treat him psychologically. But she fails to explicitly articulate what "that" or "it" refers to, making it seem as if she is alluding to something sexual. While *A Couch in New York* certainly employs more conventional techniques, typically reserved for classical cinema, and thus departs stylistically from her experimental work from the 1970s, her characters

still remain unknowable, particularly in their relationship to each other. *A Couch in New York* is a simpler, more conventional romantic comedy than Akerman's earlier works. But, like in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, the film's ambiguous framing and unfulfilled assumptions warn viewers to never get too comfortable in certainty.

In fact, much of *A Couch in New York*'s narrative relies on ambiguity and indistinguishability. For example, when Béatrice first takes Dr. Harriston's role as psychoanalyst, his patients do not notice the change. They merely enter their analyst's apartment and begin discussing their problems. When one patient notices the obvious change in the analyst sitting across from him, he immediately assumes that she is Dr. Harriston's replacement, and begins his session. Henry meanwhile is in Paris, constantly being bombarded by voice messages from Béatrice's ex-lovers. When one of these suitors shows up at Béatrice's house, he assumes Henry is a fellow lover and punches him. The film's characters often interact as if they are indistinguishable from others. At one point, Béatrice even begins wearing Dr. Harriston's clothing, further embodying his characteristics and profession. To achieve this effect, Akerman creates relatively detached characters, defined less by their own interior states and more by the definitions imposed upon them by others.

Performative Masculinity

In *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* Akerman hyperbolizes the driver's misogynistic attitude in a long monologue, following his and Julie's sex act, referencing both the privilege and burden of conventional masculinity. He tells Julie about the first time he met his wife, mostly revealing sexual details, thus emphasizing the lens through which he sees women. He continues, "It's nothing. It's not starting a family or supporting one. It's just about

getting laid.” But as he tells Julie how a crying woman “works every time” to get him off, we realize that his sexual fantasy is one which at best, completely disregards the desires of his female partner, or at worst, leaves her in grief. His monologue sympathetically recognizes the brokenness of his relationships. But it also paints his deliberate

chauvinism as natural byproduct of his gender. His dysfunctional illustration of sex and sexuality is tied to his marital boredom, jealousy of other men’s

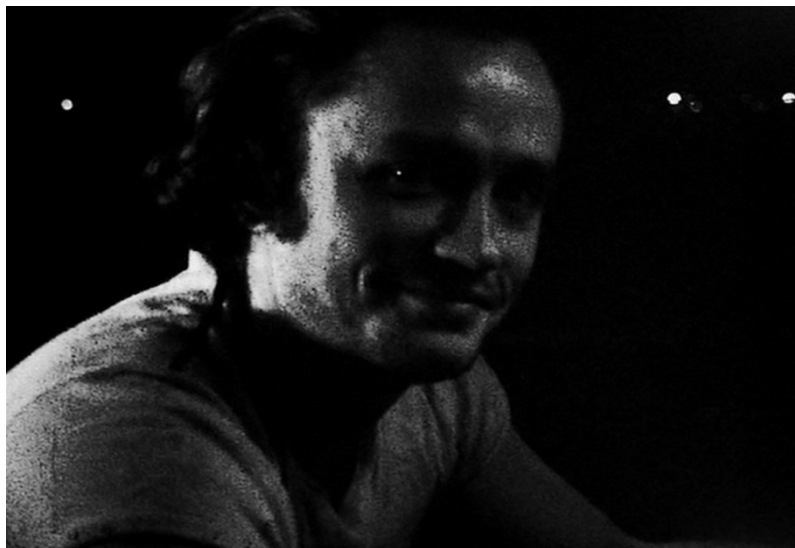


Figure 2.5 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

lives and a sense of onerous duty that he finds comes with being the “man of the house.” For the driver, who prefers casual sex with hitchhikers to real intimacy with his wife, intercourse is merely a release from emotional attachment.

Rendez Vous D’Anna also offers two noteworthy monologues by male characters, who detail the pressures of traditional masculinity. The film begins as Anna arrives in Essen, where she departs for her hotel and unsuccessfully tries to call an unknown recipient in Italy. Then she enters a movie theater with two other men, presumably connected to her film screening. But when she exits, we see her in the company of a new man, who we will later find out is called Heinrich. The two are shown together in bed, but Anna asks him to leave. Heinrich invites Anna to have lunch with his family the next day. And there, he delivers the first extended monologue of the film, a trope that will

repeat upon each of the protagonist's meetings. He discusses the difficulties of his wife leaving him and the pressures of raising a family. The man's speech merges personal and national distress, as details of his own life turn into revelations about German history. After Anna has lunch with the man and his family, she departs, marking the end of the first section.

In *Rendez Vous D'Anna*, the titular character's encounter with her boyfriend, Daniel, provides a sharp, heterosexual contrast to a prior scene with her mother, which I will detail in the next chapter. He too recites a monologue, quite reminiscent of the truck driver's in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*. He details his feelings of isolation, which he attributes to the incongruence between "work and pleasure" in the "post-industrial" world. The two eventually begin to make love but it is soon cut short when Daniel begins to feel ill. Anna goes to buy him medicine, fulfilling her presumed feminine duty to nurture. Suddenly, the scene is interrupted by a cut, and we transition to the last section of the film, suggesting Anna's transient heterosexual relationship.

Akerman's *A Couch in New York* portrays a much more nuanced vision of masculinity than the serotyped masculinity articulated by the truck driver or Daniel. The film's male protagonist is shown early on in a domestic space. Appalled by the mess at Béatrice's apartment when he first arrives, Henry begins to clean. Some of his actions are stereotypically feminine, like washing the dishes and making the bed. He is also outfitted in an apron, a stereotypical symbol of female domesticity. While other times, his household activities hint more at his growing sexual interest in the apartment's owner. He also articulates a need to "fix things," around the house, a role that stereotypically belongs to the masculine realm. His voyeuristic gaze is demonstrated, for example, when

he picks up Béatrice's bras and hosiery and deposits them into the hamper, holding on for a moment longer than seems usual. Then he picks up a bottle of her perfume to smell. Meanwhile, on the soundtrack we hear one of Béatrice's former lovers leaving a message. In his message, the lover reminisces, reminding Béatrice's machine of the time "You said yes, yes, yes," in a subtle illusion to Henry and Béatrice's later therapy session. The linkage between this message and Henry's smelling of the perfume makes his act seem driven by eroticism.

Perhaps the disparate representations of masculinity in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* and *A Couch in New York* originate from the differences in these film's form. When Akerman uses classical form, as in *A Couch in New York*, it might become more dangerous for her to feature a character with such overtly sexist views, like the driver. In *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, experimental form allows for an interpretive reading of performativity and caricature. But as a romantic comedy and commercial project, *A Couch in New York*, incites a much more literal reading. As such, Akerman, who I would argue knows all too well how representations shape reality, might depict a more nuanced view of masculinity in her development of Henry's character to encourage a positive reading of his slightly more fluid gender expression.

The driver's conspicuous displays of male supremacy are so pronounced, they beg the question, is his attitude genuine or purposefully staged? He continues to talk about his relationship with his wife and children with apathy and strangely sexualizes his children. First, he suggests that his son, who gets hard when his bottom is cleaned, is attracted to his wife. And, as if taken directly from a Freudian text, he overtly tells Julie that his 11-year-old daughter turns him on. Coupled with the driver's earlier sexual prejudice, his

incestuous desires seem too disturbing for him to be so forthcoming and too psychoanalytically grounded to be original thoughts. Rather, I would argue that Akerman includes this monologue to assert her authorial presence and to cite Freudian psychosexual theories, as related to her characters own psychological states.

If the driver's monologue is indeed staged, as I assert, then Akerman's intent seems be satirical of the phallogentric mentality pervasive in film and media. "Penis envy," a psychosexual phase theorized by Freud claims that the defining moment in a women's transition to mature female sexuality and legitimate gender identity is when young girls experience anxiety upon realizing that they lack a penis. According to Freud's theory of penis envy, this stage occurs when a young girl transitions from attachment to her mother to competition with her mother for attention and affection from her father. It is at this stage that the daughter experiences envy for the penis, of which she feels denied. The male parallel, termed "castration anxiety" occurs when a boy realizes that women do not have a penis.

Penis envy, like the male gaze, posits that women only act to symbolize lack, as a secondary counterpart to men. Not only is this notion troublingly sexist. It is also compulsively heteronormative. Throughout *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* Akerman draws stark divisions between Julie and the truck driver. In doing so she seems to reproduce the sexist and heteronormative drive present in Freud's theory as well as a considerable amount of cinematic representations. But, set against the context of the driver's caricatured misogyny, this imagery also appears as a satirical statement against Hollywood's monolithic representations of masculinity and femininity. In other words, Ackerman references the formal system in question in order to deconstruct its bounds.

The driver's narration marks a reversal in the film's audio patterns and questions any assumptions of narrative objectivity. In the first part of the film, visual and auditory cues are mismatched. But in the second part, not only does the driver narrate the sexual encounter and dictate Julie's movement with exactitude. He also adds, after he has finished, "I'm putting my head on the wheel," as he completes the action. The driver's redundant articulation of his action contrasts sharply with the disjointed voiceover in the film's first part, which either predicts or recounts actions before or after they have occurred. Ivone Margulies writes "Its twisted indexicality and its position of ever more sophisticated modalities of disjunction have but one intention: to stage the representation of subjectivity as inherently relational."⁴⁸ In the first third of the *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, the audience might assume disjunction as film's state. But this sudden reversal suggests that such an assumption is itself flawed. By switching between registers, the film de-centers its viewer's observations and rejects any assumptions we might make.

Akerman's position as both director and performer further interrogates the potential for filmic objectivity. In the last split second of the "masturbation" scene, the truck driver looks directly at the camera, which is also positioned so that he is presumably looking directly at Julie. In doing so he recognizes his own existence as a performer and the presence of the camera. Meanwhile, this moment reveals Akerman's double identity as both actor and director of the film. If the separation between on and off screen Akerman is not obvious enough throughout the film, it is clarified in the closing credits, which identify "Julie" rather than Chantal as the actor. Akerman's very existence blurs the boundaries between the titular, "Je," "Tu," "Il," and "Elle" and suggests a

⁴⁸ Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 121.

certain liminality. As both a participant and observer, Akerman suggests a radical alternative to the male gaze – a mutual, two-way gaze.

Separate Reflections

The mirror scenes of the film's first third are alluded to again in the second part, only this time they emphasize the distance between Julie and the truck driver. After the sex scene and his long-winded coda, the driver and Julie stop in a bathroom where the truck driver shaves his face. The sounds of the sink and razor are pronounced, drawing attention to their presence. They stand in front of the mirror, coupled together in its frame. But he is positioned against a white towel covering in the background, while she is framed against black wall paint. Their subtle division is reminiscent of earlier scenes, where the two are separated by either colored markers or physical barriers and emphasizes the individual's disconnect.

Akerman uses mirrors in *A Couch in New York* as a means of identification between male and female leads rather than a marker of division. When Henry and Béatrice arrive home after diving in the lake after Henry's dog, a changing sequence clarifies this relationship. Béatrice gives Henry, disguised as her patient John Wire, one of his own suits try on, then disappears behind a white curtain to change herself. Her silhouette is pronounced behind white curtains. And in the center of the billowing white drapes it seems as if there is a space we can look through into the closet. But she pulls back the curtain and we realize the surface is actually mirrored, reflecting the closet across the room. Now we see Henry reflected in the mirror, attired in a well-fitted suit. Béatrice emerges from the curtains, to the left mirror, in an elegant, long black dress.

At this point, the two actually stand on opposite sides of the room. But the mirror, placed next to Béatrice, makes it seem as if they are situated next to each other. Then John/Henry's actual figure comes into the frame. We see him look adoringly at Béatrice in the mirror. And we notice Béatrice impressed by the suit's perfect fit, unaware that it is actually, quite comically, Henry's own suit. She too comes into



the frame and fixes the collar of his suit. Unlike the two mirrors in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, which create separate realms for Julie and the driver, the single mirror in *A Couch in New York* couples the male and female protagonists. I find it difficult to draw any strong conclusion about this scene, in part because of the film's place within the Hollywood canon. But I do find it significant to note the ways in which Béatrice and Henry's identification differ dramatically from Julie and the driver's. Perhaps this distinction stems from the commercial nature of *A Couch in New York*. Or perhaps it is more a signal of Akerman's own evolution as filmmaker.

When the driver finishes shaving, the camera pans so that now two mirrors enter the shot, further visualizing their dissociation. Julie is reflected in the left mirror, gazing over at the driver, and he is reflected in the right mirror, using a urinal. Her fascination throughout the scene seems to suggest a voyeuristic interest in male rituals, however mundane they may be. Buttressed by the fact that this scene directly precedes the final

“act” of the film, Julie and the driver’s separate reflections might refer to the ways in which they are differentiated by contrived gender-specific practices. Their distinct separation, not only in this scene, but also throughout the entire liaison, comments upon film’s traditionally heteronormative



Figure 2.7 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974
symmetry, only to overthrow these conventions in the next section.

CHAPTER 3 - ELLE

*When people ask me if I am a feminist film maker, I reply I am a woman and I also make films.*⁴⁹

The third and final section of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* begins with a door, in much the same way that the first section ends with one. In the first section, Julie exits her confinement through a door. Whereas now she enters through one, into the home of her female ex-lover. The white door of the apartment makes apparent Julie's shadow, which enters the screen before her physical form. And at first, her shadow appears split by a column in the building, almost as if it reflects two individuals, walking side by side. Then Akerman stands directly in front of the door and rings the bell. Her shadow on the front door stares back, appearing almost as another entity. These coupled shadows outside of the apartment predict the erotic homosexual sequence that will occur inside.

The following shot shows Akerman entering the building's elevator. At first, we see her reflected through the elevator mirror. Then, as she continues to walk forward, her actual body appears. Like in the



Figure 3.1 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

⁴⁹ Chantal Akerman, Interview by David Wood, "Chantal Akerman: La Captive," *BBC Entertainment*, 2000.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2001/04/26/chantal_ackerman_the_captive_interview.shtml

previous scene, a reflection of Akerman appears before her corporeal form. Perhaps this demonstrates her interest in the filmic medium or serves a more symbolic purpose, questioning the boundaries of self. The elevator stops, and she exits, opening the door to a jet-black hallway, and then waiting at the cracked door, seemingly gathering up the courage to enter. Eventually Julie pushes her way inside and the door slams shut, enveloping the screen in darkness.

Chantal The Actress

No sooner does Julie enter the apartment than she trips and falls in front of her female host. Akerman's clumsiness is a self-declared hallmark. She remarks:

I'm a female Charlie Chaplin, I could have made slapstick comedy. I'm thinking more and more about acting again, in my films. My body in a movie is very important, it says something by itself, it has the weight of the Real. I can't have actresses playing my clumsiness.⁵⁰

Throughout Akerman's career, she has always called herself directly into play. This fact is most obvious in that Akerman acts in many of her own films. But even in *Les Rendez Vous D'Anna* and *Couch in New York*, the filmmaker's persona emerges. In *Les Rendez Vous D'Anna*, the protagonist Anna takes on Akerman's biographic details, as a queer, Belgian filmmaker. Akerman's own middle name is even Anne. In *Couch in New York* Béatrice's body language, and at some points, even her dress, allude to Akerman's character. Even in *News from Home*, a film without any distinct characters, we see an illusion to Akerman's earlier self, in the use of the sugar motif. By combining the deeply personal with a sense of anonymity, Akerman integrates the self and other, raising both to a level of subtle notability.

⁵⁰ Chantal Akerman, Interview by Élisabeth Lebovici, "No Idolatry and Losing Everything That Made You a Slave." *Mousse Magazine*, December 2011. <http://moussemagazine.it/chantal-akerman-elisabeth-lebovici-2011/>

After Julie trips, the woman, whom we presume to be a previous lover, laughs at her seemingly predictable lack of coordination. But when Akerman's character sits next to her lover on the bed, she seriously announces "I don't want you to stay." Julie struggles gracelessly to zip up her jacket then stands for a moment smiling at the woman. The two women hug goodbye, but Julie lingers with her lover in the hallway, opening and closing the door behind her, in a clear attempt to remain with her. Eventually Julie declares "I'm hungry." The woman gives in and returns back inside to prepare a sandwich.

In exaggerated motions, Julie devours the meal and asks for more. This time the woman brings back an entire tray of bread and spreads and Julie watches her carefully while she prepares two more sandwiches and places them in a towered formation in front of her guest. But Julie is still not satisfied and asks for a drink. The woman complies once more and brings her a bottle of wine. Julie's voracious hunger and thirst might suggest an unfulfilled sexual desire, due to her potentially unsatisfying heterosexual relationship in the prior section, or a longing for nurturance. The second hypothesis would make sense in terms of Akerman's own connection to her mother, especially given Julie's distinct similarity to the filmmaker, both in disposition but also in her very being.

Women's Space

If the truck driver of the film's second section represents an archetypal masculinity, then the woman of the third section represents an opposite femininity. The very location of her entrance into the narrative, the home, marks a typified female domesticity. And her actions within that space further emphasize her femininity. She prepares a sandwich and wine for Julie. And, when she is finally seduced by Julie, despite

her earlier articulation that she prefers Julie not stay, she demonstrates a learned submission. Even her floral night gown, trimmed with lace, appears distinctly more feminine than Julie's sleek black raincoat. In establishing the female lover's space as decidedly feminine, Akerman frees her own character from embodying a stereotypical vision of femininity and instead allows her character a more ambiguous identity.

I would argue that Akerman feminizes spaces, in addition to identities, throughout her career as a means of destabilizing traditional conceptions of patriarchal time and place. In *News from Home*, Akerman articulates her subjective position as a female in both linguistic and spatial terms. I do not mean that she creates a stereotypically feminine space, as in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle's* final third. Rather, I think that the way in which the filmmaker dissolves boundaries between a space and its inhabitants starkly contrasts the removed presence of modern architecture, which assumes the urban environment is full of raw material in need of being shaped by the architect. *News from Home* deals with exterior architecture in much the way that the hermetic Julie maps the architecture of her psyche onto her isolated room in the first section of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*.

Drawing on architectural theory, Jennifer M. Barker suggest that in the city, “family residences, laundries, schools and other places identified with women remain at the street level while skyscrapers penthouses and observation decks are occupied by the architect, executive and traditionally male flâneur.”⁵¹ Throughout *News from Home*, Akerman maintains firm ground, observing the ground-level landscape of subways, alleys, and other hidden spaces. Her camera strolls down the streets and rides through

⁵¹ Jennifer M. Barker, “The Feminine side of New York: Travelogue, Autobiography and Architecture” in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003) 46.

subway cars, observing the city as a part of its landscape, rather than a distant entity trying to mold it.

At one point, the camera is set up at the rear end of the train car, looking forward towards the train's passengers. The next train car comes in and out of view, its depth of focus reliant on the train's random movements, as it curves on top of the tracks. By filming New York inhabitants as they wander down random paths creates a certain illegibility of text, that resists what Barker notes as the modern city's desire to manage the movements of individuals within a given bounds. In this way, Akerman's representation of space is much like her formal construction of time, sound, or, more broadly, her cinematic structure. She abstracts these elements in order to subvert preconception and reshape predictable tropes and compositions.

News from Home also moves away from preconceived urban spaces in its recognition of "the other." Akerman films urbanity as a space occupied by people living on edges of "legitimate" city life. Oftentimes these characters are seen through windows

or reflections, marking them as separate from the characters of New York's conventional narrative. The city Akerman shows is full of graffiti and



Figure 3.2 Source: Akerman, *News From Home*, 1977

chaos. But it is also quite beautiful, a relic from another time. Perhaps Akerman's most poignant representation of this "female" other within the city is the woman who sits, staring back at the camera at the corner of an intersection. The traffic light reads "don't walk," mimicking the halt in pedestrian traffic that her presence commands. In showing a woman who inhabits a significant position in the urban environment, Akerman locates a female subjectivity within an architectural space, primarily built and controlled by men.

When Julie departs from the masculine space constructed in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s second section, and arrives at her female lover's apartment, she finally arrives at the potential for a reciprocal queer relationship, though this identity too becomes impermanent. She eats some of the meal that the woman has served her, then pushes a piece of her sandwich back to the other woman, encouraging her to share. The camera angle changes from looking at the women straight on, to a medium-close up, filmed from behind Julie's shoulder. This is one of the only times in the film that Akerman resorts to the codes of continuity editing. Interestingly, the reverse shot even functions similarly to

its use in classical cinema, providing identification between characters and for the spectator. Julie grabs the woman's hand, but she pushes her



Figure 3.3 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

away. Then she grabs her breast and begins to unbutton the women's nightgown. At first, I read Julie's desire as purely sexual. But, informed by Akerman's interest in the mother and the character's awkward, almost juvenile, movements, Julie's reaching for the breast might allude to a baby as it reaches to feed from its mother. At first, the woman protests but eventually smiles, seeming to accept the advance.

Mothers and Daughters

In *Rendez Vous D'Anna*, after another traveling section, Anna arrives in Brussels late at night, where her mother waits for her. First the two get tea at the train station cafe, then they spend the night in a hotel. While Anna's previous meetings establish a certain distance between herself and the other, the segment with her mother indicates a greater degree of identification. The establishing shots and shot/reverse/shot techniques employed in this section rely on the codes of continuity editing and might suggest that Anna best identifies with her role as daughter. Though the film's form never edges towards classicism, the application of these techniques does suggest a degree of naturalism, reflective of Anna's identity as daughter.

The sound design of the train station scene also contributes to the bond established between mother and daughter. As Anna meets her mother in the station, the sound of her clicking high heels is pronounced. Then the sound comes to a halt and we hear the sound of another pair of high heels enter from across the room. When Anna recognizes the sound as her mother's shoes she hurries across the station. The sound of the women's footsteps echo until they meet. Filmed in a long-shot, Anna and her mother converse. But the audience is unable to hear their exchange. The metronomic effect of the women's footsteps gives way to a deep silence, that emphasizes the private nature of their

meeting. In excluding the audience from Anna and her mother's conversation, Akerman



emphasizes the women's intimate relationship, a relationship that viewers will never be fully privy too.

The intimacy between mother and daughter is explored further

Figure 3.4 Source: Akerman, *Rendez Vous d'Anna*, 1978

when the two arrive at the hotel later that night. When Anna begins to undress for bed she asks her mother “aren’t you going to undress?” to which she responds, “let me just look at you.” We learn that the two haven’t seen each other for three years, and thus the mother’s interest in her daughter's body becomes a moment of reconnection. This sequence opposes the Freudian normalization of the Oedipus complex, which results in “the obliteration of the daughter's relation to the mother and the reversal of love for the mother into hatred and resentment as the daughter enters the world of language and desire.”⁵² In this, and all of Akerman’s films, desire centers around the maternal body, both the presence and absence of the mother, and the enduring gaze between mother and daughter.

When Anna tells her mother that she needs to make a call to Italy in the middle of the night, her mother suspiciously inquires. Anna then tells her mother about an affair she had with an Italian woman, whom she met at a screening. At first, Anna says she felt “a sort of disgust,” revealing the socially trained heteronormativity the character has

⁵² Brenda Longfellow, “Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13, no. 1-2 (1989): 74.

internalized. But eventually she declares “It was good...I never imagined it would be like that between women. Not at all. We didn’t separate all night.” Anna’s description invokes a sense of naturalness at the coupling of women. Their lack of separation hints towards the homosexual recognition of the self in the other, a sentiment reflected by the intertwining bodies of the women in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*. Perhaps most importantly, she tells her mother “And you know, bizarrely, I thought of you.” As the story ends, a naked Anna curls up against her mother, visualizing what seems to be a symbolic return to the womb. The story of desire between Anna and the Italian woman mimics, with important differences, the symbiotic and atavistic relationship with the mother.

Béatrice, in *A Couch in New York*, also emphasizes the child’s physical and psychological connection to the mother. At first when she is unable to treat Henry, undercover as John Wire, she assumes that he must not love his mother. She comes to this conclusion based on the Freudian theory of transference, the theoretical phenomenon, in which one unconsciously redirects feeling about one person onto another. In other words, as her best friend Anne tells her, patients enact their love of the mother on the couch, out of fear of committing incest.

After Béatrice and Henry have a successful second session, she tells her patient, “Oh please its normal, you love your mother...there’s no reason to be afraid of committing incest, that’s what you’re here for.” Most of their dialogue is seen through the frosted glass of a door, obscuring Henry’s reactions. Even as she co-opts Hollywood form, Akerman retains a certain degree of spectatorial and character subjectivity, through this and other framing devices. She continues, “for me the worst thing about mothers is

that they grow old and then they die. Then all of a sudden you have no mother and no father.”

Erotic Exposition

After Julie’s lover finally succumbs to her advances, the next three takes depict



their sexual encounter from three positions. First, they are filmed straight on, their bodies seemingly converging into one. Displayed on the right wall is a figurine of a man and women. And sitting on a table to the left of the

Figure 3.5 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

bed is what appears to be a sponge, a hermaphroditic organism. The male and female figures might represent the institution of marriage, while the sponge represents the permeability of gender. As such, the placement of these objects questions the naturalness of heteronormativity and gendered binaries.

Michael Koresky, a film critic writing for the *Criterion Collection*’s “Eclipse Series”, argues that the women’s ten-minute sex scene is almost non-sexual, symbolizing a “complete dissociation, from narrative, from body, from life.”⁵³ I would not go as far to call their erotic encounter non-sexual. But the lack of point of view shots, common to pornography, and the athletic nature of their sex, which appears almost as a wrestling

⁵³ Michael Koresky, “Chantal Akerman in the Seventies,” *The Criterion Collection* (January 2010), <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1351-eclipse-series-19-chantal-akerman-in-the-seventies>

match, certainly differentiates itself from conventionally pornographic images. The erotic scene's departure from a "goal-oriented depiction of time"⁵⁴ contrasts the active, controlling male gaze, and consequently intercepts identification with the masculine position that Mulvey asserts in her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".

This final section also frees the film's female leads from an exploitative approach, via close-ups, to capturing their form. Instead the static nature of the camera allows the characters a form of intimacy, despite the nudity on display. Meanwhile long takes, static framing and a lack of exaggerated sound design offer a more naturalistic environment and a more realistic depiction of intercourse. I also would assert that this scene does not show the culmination of sexual intercourse, as neither of the women seem to climax. This is one way in which Akerman disturbs narrative structures, both the narrative structure of cinema and that of pornography.

Narrative Suspension

In the morning, Julie leaves her lover's apartment, while she remains sleeping in the bed, suggesting that her homosexual experience was only a transitory stage rather than the



Figure 3.6 Source: Akerman, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, 1974

⁵⁴ Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship" *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 4 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 13-16.

definite conclusion to the journey. Veronica Pravadelli notes: “in suspending narrative closure, Akerman also refuses to romanticize lesbianism and to posit it as the solution to the inadequacy of the heterosexual matrix.”⁵⁵ The very open-ended structure of the film rejects the formal devices and construction of drama common to conventional cinema. Cixous’ call for an *écriture féminine*, discussed in the background section of this thesis, is met by Akerman’s balance between experimental and narrative registers. Cixous writes:

A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless...The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn’t haunt feminine unconscious. Rather it’s the beginning, or beginnings, the manner of beginning, not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus but starting on all sides at once that makes a feminine writing...This takes the metaphorical form of wandering excess...no reckoning, a feminine text can’t be predicted, isn’t predictable isn’t knowable and is therefore very disturbing. It can’t be anticipated, and I believe femininity is written outside anticipation: it really is the text of the unforeseeable.⁵⁶

The partial suspension of narrative pervades most of Akerman’s work. For example, the circular panning structure in *La Chambre*, as previously mentioned, undermines linearity in favor of a more inclusive tone. The wandering narrative in *Rendez Vous D’Anna* has a similar effect. I would argue that while the film screening is the declared reason for Anna’s trip, it does not take on any real diegetic importance. Rather, as the title declares, it is really Anna’s meetings, and the repetition of these events, that actually take on importance. In other words, Akerman seems more interested in moments of transience than conclusion.

After meeting the German schoolteacher Heinrich, several train shots mark the film’s transition to Anna’s next meeting with her family friend Ida, who has just moved back to Germany after having fled Nazi persecution. Ida berates Anna for not having yet

⁵⁵ Veronica Pravadelli. *Performance, Rewriting Identity: Chantal Akerman’s Postmodern Cinema*. (Michigan: Otto Publishing, 2000), 134.

⁵⁶ Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation,” *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1981): 53.

started a family, a woman's duty according to the older woman, and urges Anna to marry her son. Like Heinrich, Ida's conversation quickly turns to a monologue. Ida tells Anna about her own feelings of grief. Having survived the Holocaust, Ida feels that she has no home, and as an aging woman, she feels that she is no longer important to her sons. Ida's monologue marks Akerman's own Jewish identity and familial trauma, and her interest in maternal connection, which will be further explored in the next section, as Anna meets with her mother. The transience of this section, and Anna's other meetings, demonstrate the suspension of narrative closure in favor of a more wandering trajectory.

Upon departing from her boyfriend Henry's house, Anna returns to her apartment, where she listens to the answering machine. Her voicemail is filled with messages from unknown characters, potentially foreshadowing another series of potential meetings. One comes from her female lover, voiced by Chantal Akerman. This final scene suggests a continuation of Anna's physical and personal journey. While in some ways, *Rendez Vous D'Anna*, like *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, takes on the form of a road movie, the voyage veers from enacting a codified plot. Instead the film's importance derives from its suspension of narrative. I would argue that the only narrative element that remains firm throughout Akerman's film is the attachment to the mother. In much the same way that Julie's exit from her lover's apartment asserts the impermanence of her sexuality, the constant nomadism throughout *Rendez Vous D'Anna*, and the film's ultimate inconclusivity, constructs Anna's trajectory as moving towards progress rather than destination. In other words, both films avoid essentialist categories by turning to a cyclical structure.

The passionate and highly visible lovemaking scene in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s final third explores sexuality not as a state of being, but as a continual process of realizing the self in

relation to the other. The women's entangled limbs blur the boundary between "Je" and "Tu" until both women become "Elle." The scene's frank portrayal of sex, its sheer length, and the camera's straight-on angle clearly queer cinematic representations of sex. Unlike, the truck drivers sex scene, in which he is fully clothed, and she is off screen, the candidness of the women's sex scene forces viewers to confront their own uncomfortable position. But I do not think that *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* is a feminist piece only because it features a sex scene between two women, though I do think Akerman's depiction is quite radical. Rather I think that the film responds to calls of feminist film theorists because of Julie's exit from this, and every other space, that she occupies. The female bodies of the film's celebratory finale discover, in part through each other, new ways of existing in the world, ultimately allowing Julie to complete her initial intention, that is to depart out into the world. It is Julie's capacity to act, her continual departure and return, and refusal to stay on script, that disallows her identification within the patriarchal matrix.

Je, Tu, Il, Elle's opening words "et je suis partie" might, at first, seem to refer to Julie's initial departure from her isolated apartment in section one. But as she leaves her lover's apartment in section three, we begin to realize that the first line may actually refer to her exit in the final act. She moves the woman's arm, gets out of bed and pulls the blinds open, referencing the motifs of light and windows that begin the film's first section. Then naked, holding her crumpled clothes over her breast, Julie exits. The suspended action of departure is, in fact, completed at the end of each of the film's sections, signaling that her first statement could refer to any of these occasions. This means that the film's organization does not necessarily follow a chronological sequence

of events. Rather the viewer is confronted with a multiplicity of interpretations of order and time.

After Julie departs from the woman's apartment, her lover makes a slight movement of the arm, emphasizing her partner's absence. The slight sound of birds chirping and car engines revving up fill the room. And the "Chanson de Jeu" begins to play, continuing alongside the rolling credits and then against a black screen. In English, the song translates to "We'll to the woods no more/The laurels are all gone/The pretty lass has gathered them all/See the people dance/Come join the dance/Leap and dance and kiss whom you please." The call and response style of the song, answered by the voices of children, allude back to the film's chalkboard title. While the first reference to the classroom touches upon the constructed gender norms taught in both formal and informal schooling, this final inclusion of children envisions a widening of the possibilities of sexuality and identity, not to be learned but experienced.

If we understand *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*'s final "act" as a queer interrogation of narrative closure and definitive sexuality, then it also becomes the film's most profound celebration of "je's" capacity to move beyond fixity. The subject, informed by her dual presence as performer and director, experiences the continual process of creating the self, shifting between "Tu" "Il" and "Elle." Yet these pronouns always function in relation to her unceasing identity as "Je." Judith Halberstam discusses the self-identification of queerness as a potential means of opening up "new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space."⁵⁷ *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* embodies this claim, as it explores an

⁵⁷ Judith Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005): 2.

alternative means of moving through time and space, and thereby creates an opening from which a revolutionary feminist politics might emerge.

CONCLUSION

Akerman's career spanned for over four decades and includes an extensive body of work. Yet, her films elude easy classification, formally and thematically, frequently blurring the bounds between experimental cinema, drama, comedy, documentary and video art. Despite their aesthetic disparateness, Akerman's films are certainly interconnected, both in their continued return to mirrors, letters, the mother figure, performativity, and other motifs, and their lack of imposition of meaning upon viewers.

While the filmmaker's hypnotic and formally daring cinema does not necessarily comply with an essentialist feminist philosophy, her work exhibits an unmistakably feminist approach. In enabling viewers to freely navigate her film's terrain and come to their own conclusions, Akerman interrupts dominant, heteronormative visual and temporal frameworks. Pragmatically, Akerman displays a feminist stance in her use of mainly female film crews. In offering women positions usually reserved for men Akerman literally disturbs the male gaze. She also tends to shoot at her own eye level, clearly establishing her position relative to the subject and thus interrogating the camera's voyeuristic impulse. And when she stands in front of the camera, Akerman tends to stare directly at the filmmaker and audience, confronting the looker and asserting her active position, even as a subject.

In the introduction to this thesis I outlined the demands made by feminist film theorists in the 1960s and 70s. Having now presented a detailed analysis of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, and accompanying films, I maintain that Chantal Akerman's body of work displays such a nuanced representation of women and a revolutionary use of form that her legacy moves beyond these calls of second wave feminists, whose criticisms were too

proscriptive for Akerman's elusive spirit. Akerman's films surely exist ahead of their time. Instead of articulating any one female experience, Akerman presents a more pluralistic vision of identity, with the understanding that there should be as many different ways for women to express themselves "as there are different kinds of women making films," or different kinds of women in general.⁵⁸

Originally, I intended for my thesis to encompass a much broader range of Akerman's work. But I found *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* to be so rich with material that I decided to focus my attention on the important ways in which this early film displays Akerman's feminist imagery. If I were to continue this project, I would return to the broader scope of my original proposal, to reflect upon how Akerman's aesthetic shift in the 1990s and 2000s might complicate her feminist politics. Specifically, I would focus on her final documentary, an ode to her deceased mother, *No Home Movie*.

Unlike her penultimate film, *Almayer's Folly* (2011), an adaption of Joseph Conrad's first novel, *No Home Movie* is composed of minimalist vignettes of Chantal and her mother in her mother's Brussels flat. Their conversations are filmed on digital camera and indeed resemble a highly sophisticated home movie. Where before the two would communicate via letters, in moments of separation, they now talk through Skype, a clear sign of the changing times. Somehow, both a departure from the trajectory of her previous films and completely in tune with her earlier work, *No Home Movie* was met with mixed reviews. Still, I believe it would greatly inform my study of Akerman's feminist lens, specifically in its thematic exploration of her identity as daughter.

⁵⁸ Chantal Akerman quoted in Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010): 49.

A documentarian, story-teller, comedian, singer, and relentless trailblazer, Chantal Akerman made films that were distinctly her own. She refused to comply with the conventions dictated by her mostly male predecessors, though always bearing in mind the criticality of both a personal and collective past. Her impressively forward-thinking, feminist images compel viewers to review them patiently, time and time again, garnering new and more nuanced readings with each exposure. Perhaps it is the endlessly generative nature of Akerman's films, in particular *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, that truly distinguishes them as modern feminist masterpieces.

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