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## Between Literature and the Moving Image: The Cinematography of Chantal Akerman

In the history of the relations between literature and the cinema, the *écrivains-cinéastes*, these amphibious artists who excel in both media, destabilising traditional genre conventions and opening up a new hybrid zone between the written and the audio-visual, occupy a particularly fascinating, but surprisingly underrated place. If the 1930s and 40s were shaped by such tutelary figures as Jean Cocteau and André Malraux (to whom one could add Benjamin Fondane, Blaise Cendrars, or, on the more popular end of the spectrum, Marcel Pagnol and Sacha Guitry), it is in the 1960s and 70s that writers like Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Georges Perec take to the camera. Their work across both media reinforces the alliance between *Nouveau Cinéma* and *Nouveau Roman* that had already produced such remarkable collaborations as Resnais and Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Resnais and Robbe-Grillet's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), both instantly described as 'cinéma littéraire' at the time of their release. In light of the recent crossovers between writing and filmmaking of artists such as Catherine Breillat, Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Virginie Despentes, but also of the new cinematographies of writing developed by authors like Alice Ferney, Tanguy Viel and Pierre Alferi, it would be tempting to see the early twenty-first century as a third decisive new period that is opening up in the relationship between the literary and the filmic.<sup>1</sup> Whilst attractive, such a rough periodisation of the *écrivains-cinéastes* phenomenon would of necessity be schematic and incomplete. At closer look, it turns out that many artists whom one would be inclined to classify under the first two groups considerably exceed the given period, in actual fact remaining active well into the next phase: Cocteau's intermedial experiments, with a particular focus on poetry and film, continued until his death in 1963; Jean Giono, habitually listed under the first phase as well, made his film *Crésus* in 1960; Robbe-Grillet, a stalwart of the second phase, released his last film, *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle*, in 2006. As with all periodisations, we must bear in mind that movements and trends do not merely follow one another in strict succession; rather, new forms of expression crystallise and coalesce, imposing themselves as the dominant form in a far more heterogeneous artistic field. The 1930s/40s, 1960s/70s and the early twenty-first century each constitutes a particularly notable phase in the relationship between literature and film as it has developed over the past one hundred years: cinema's establishment as a fully recognised art form no longer in the shadow of its sister arts; the emergence of the neo-avant-gardes in film and literature; the increasingly intermedial practice of twenty-first century artists in the wake of the multimedia revolution. Yet focusing on these specific periods may make us oblivious to the interstices between them, where already existing trends are consolidated and new trajectories are carved out by artists who, in their very status as an avant-garde, are of necessity out of sync with the dominant movements of their time.

Chantal Akerman, ever ahead of the game, is such a figure. Over a career spanning almost half a century, Akerman has seamlessly crossed over generic and media boundaries, extending her experiments from film to literature and, since the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Cléder discusses the works of Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, Alice Ferney and Tanguy Viel as examples of a third period in the relations between literature and cinema in his coruscating *Entre littérature et cinéma. Les affinités électives* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012), p. 179 and pp. 184-93. The term 'cinematography' in my title is borrowed from his book. For a stimulating new approach to the relations between literature and the cinema see also Jacques Rancière, *Les Ecarts du cinéma* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2011).

mid-1990s, to moving-image installations. Concerned with borders and frontiers, her work persistently challenges traditional boundaries between feature and documentary, cinema space and art gallery, literature and film. Moving backwards and forwards between different media, but also incorporating several of them in video art, she has been engaged in an experimental project 'in progress' where traditional media boundaries are undone and new forms of self-representation are being probed and invented. In the interval between literature and film – each of which she considers to a certain extent as incomplete and lacking – the Belgian artist creates resonances that allow her to speak and think that which she could not express in one medium alone. An *écrivain-cinéaste* par excellence, but also a pioneer in the domain of expanded cinema, Akerman resolutely works in-between media, yet the cultural and disciplinary habit of separating the arts tends to make us consider her moving image work as if it were created in isolation from writing. To capture more fully the dynamics of this singular oeuvre, it is time to look at the interzone between the written and the moving image in her work.

### The Pure and the Impure

Though known primarily for her groundbreaking work as a filmmaker and a video artist, in interviews and her intellectual autobiography *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste*, Akerman frequently speaks of her initial reticence towards the audio-visual medium and her ongoing predilection for the literary. 'Le livre', she states in the text accompanying her video installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*, 'était sans doute toujours plus important pour moi que le cinéma. Le cinéma reste toujours en quelque sorte "impur". [...] Tu ne te feras point d'image taillée.'<sup>2</sup> She explains in a 1979 interview with Jean-Luc Godard that, as a Jewish director with a religious upbringing, her cinematic practice is profoundly shaped by the prohibition against visual representation and against the worship of idols from the book of *Exodus*. Even if she readily transgresses this injunction against images in her artistic work, her visual aesthetic is inflected by a deep distrust of the spectacular or the sensational, making her privilege what she calls 'distilled' images over more direct representational strategies. For Akerman, as for Walter Benjamin, the truth of an image lies, above all, in its capacity to make visible, in a dialectical process, the connection between past and present. This more oblique approach that characterises her representational ethics, revealingly, is implicitly aligned with literary forms of representation. When Godard teases her for drawing on metaphors like 'inscription' or 'writing' to describe her work as a director whereas he prefers to cast his cinematic practice in a more media-specific language, she insists on the graphological trope: 'I say that, yes, there are images already inscribed, and it is exactly *under* those that I work: over the inscribed image and the one I want to inscribe.'<sup>3</sup> The literary here, unlike in the *auteurist* discourses of the Nouvelle Vague, is not merely used to valorise the cinematic; it is drawn upon as a purer form of representation that can to a certain extent counterbalance the idolatrous, impure nature of the cinema. Similarly, her trademark use of frontal shots, more than a stylistic choice, is a means to deflect cinema's idolatrous gaze: '*En face* is perhaps less idolatry in this idolatrous world.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Chantal Akerman, 'Neben seinen Schnürsenkeln in einem leeren Kühlschrank laufen', in Astrid Ofner, Claudia Siefen and Stefan Flach, eds., *Retrospektive Chantal Akerman* (Vienna: Schüren, 2011), p. 73 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Akerman and Jean-Luc Godard, 'Entretien avec Jean-Luc Godard,' *Ça Cinéma* 19 (1980), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Retrospektive Chantal Akerman*, p. 73.

Akerman initially wanted to become a writer until, aged fifteen, she discovered *Pierrot le fou* (1965) and with it, the subversive lyricism and intensely personal *auteur* style of a director who not only vied with the most original of creative writing, but incorporated the written into the narrative fabric of his films. Literature and the written more generally play an important part in the construction of her imaginary as well as in her creative practice. In interviews and in *Autoportrait en cinéaste*, she mentions Kafka, Proust, Faulkner, James Baldwin, Vasily Grossman and Varlam Shalamov as authors who have had a lasting influence on her work, alongside thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Lacan, Deleuze, Guattari, and Levinas. An *auteur* in the tradition of the Nouvelle Vague – even though her own early trajectory was shaped by the New York avant-gardes of the 1970s, in particular structuralist filmmaking –, she authors most of the scripts for her films herself. Some, including her free adaptation of Proust, *La Captive* (1999), and *Un divan à New York* (1996), are co-written. The boundary between script, personal writing and film is an altogether fluid one in her creative practice: an experimental film like *Je tu il elle* (1975) first existed as a novella; the documentary *D'Est* (1993) began with fragments, travel notes and jotted down impressions. 'Il faut toujours écrire quand on veut faire un film', she declares even in the context of her documentary work.<sup>5</sup> With the publication of the scripts for *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* and *Un divan à New York*,<sup>6</sup> in the footsteps of fellow *écrivains-cinéastes* like Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras, Akerman bestows a literary status on texts which, traditionally in film production, are relegated to a purely utilitarian function. The written, especially in the form of letters, is omnipresent in her films, be it as a feature of the filmic diegesis (in for instance *Saute ma ville* (1968), *Je tu il elle*, *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), *Un divan à New York*, *Demain on déménage* (2004) and *De l'autre côté* (2002)), or, more radically, as the main narrative device in the epistolary film *News from Home* (1976). More creative forays into the hybrid zone between literature and film are tangible in the short film *Contre l'oubli: Pour Febe Elisabeth Velasquez (El Salvador)* (1991), which incorporates a poem to the memory of the Salvadorian trade unionist written by Akerman herself<sup>7</sup> as well as in the video installation *Bordering on Fiction: D'Est* (1995) which culminates in an elegiac text on the fragility of human life penned by the director. In the course of the last decade, Akerman has ventured into the interstitial genre of adaptation, where literature and cinema cross, with her acclaimed reworking of Proust, *La Captive*, and her startling cinematic translation of Joseph Conrad's debut novel, *La Folie Almayer* (2011). Revealingly, in her penultimate feature to date, *Demain on déménage*, the female protagonist (played by Sylvie Testud), a writer who struggles to find a more authentic form of literary expression, is a thinly disguised alter ego of the director herself.

Yet Akerman is not merely a filmmaker who references literature and the written in her cinematic oeuvre, however interesting such a mobilisation of an art form which, for a long time, was seen as the older rival to the younger medium of cinema may be. (It is well worth noting that the rivalry between the two, which shaped cinematic discourses well until the 1970s, is still tangible in Godard's

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<sup>5</sup> Akerman cited in Jacqueline Aubenat, 'Des mots pour une cinéaste', in Jacqueline Aubenat, *Hommage à Chantal Akerman* (Brussels: Commissariat général aux Relations internationales de la Communauté française de Belgique, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Chantal Akerman, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (Paris: Albatros, 1978); eadem, *Un divan à New York* (Paris: L'Arche, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> The poem is reproduced in Chantal Akerman, *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Paris, Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou/ Editions Cahiers du cinéma, 2004), pp. 65-66.

resistance to the literary trope in the interview above). In tandem with her work as a director, she has veered into experimental forms of writing, first in the play *Hall de nuit* and, more recently, in the autofictional ‘récit’ *Une famille à Bruxelles*.<sup>8</sup> A further autoportrait, *Ma mère rit*, which complements her intellectual autobiography *Autoportrait en cinéaste* and her various filmic selfportraits (*Lettre d’une cinéaste* (1984), *Portrait d’une paresseuse* (1986), *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1996)), is announced with Mercure de France for the autumn of 2013. In her humoristic selfportrait *Lettre d’une cinéaste*, Akerman described her written and her audio-visual offerings as complementary activities which allow her to surmount the inhibitions she has in one medium: ‘Si je fais du cinéma, c’est à cause de ce que je n’ose pas accomplir dans l’écriture’. Since the early 1990s, this desire to explore medial boundaries with a view to overcoming the limitations of a single medium has led her to installation art, where writing and film are allowed to intermingle more freely in a heterogeneous, ‘impure’ multi-media space. In fact, Akerman was one of the first filmmakers to cross over from the cinema to the museum and gallery space, which offer her the kind of latitude for her creative work that the constraints of filmmaking seldom allow. Some fifteen years later, she is recognised as a leading figure of video art, regularly exhibiting installations around the world and contributing to such prestigious art exhibitions as *Documenta* and the *Venice Biennale*. Her latest book *Ma mère rit* will form part of a performance at the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, and the Galerie Marian Goodman. But before looking more closely at this cross-over in her practice, let us first consider the tensions, overlaps and hybridisations between the written and the cinematic in her earlier filmic work.

### **Investing the Interzone: Textuality, Visuality, Narrative**

Exploring the relationship between literature and the moving image in an *écrivain-cinéaste*’s work is also, perhaps first and foremost, paying attention to how each medium is shaped and permeated by the other. In a quintessentially hybrid medium like film, one of the natural contact zones between the two arts is in the interplay between word and image, the former being traditionally associated with narrative (and thus, by extension, with literature), the latter with pure visuality (and thus the cinematic). Cinema’s struggle to establish itself amongst the canon of the older arts was strongly informed by debates as to what constitutes the medium’s ‘purest’, most cinematic ‘essence’, an ‘essence’ which, especially in the days of the classical avant-gardes, was defined in opposition to the narrative art of (realist) literature. But just as literature itself underwent radical change in the course of the twentieth century, definitions of what cinema is and how it relates to its sister arts shifted. Seminal articles by Alexandre Astruc, François Truffaut and André Bazin, not to mention Eric Rohmer’s series of essays regrouped under the title ‘Le Celluloïd et le marbre’, are instructive as regards the evolving stakes in definitions of cinema’s ontology in relation to the other arts.<sup>9</sup> Even at a time when cinema had long established itself as

<sup>8</sup> Chantal Akerman, *Hall de nuit* (Paris: L’Arche, 1997); eadem, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (Paris: L’Arche, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Alexandre Astruc, ‘Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde: la caméra-stylo’, in Astruc, *Du stylo à la caméra... et de la caméra au stylo. Ecrits (1942-1984)* (Paris: l’Archipel, 1992), pp. 324-28; François Truffaut, ‘Une certaine tendance du cinéma français’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 31 (1954), 15-29; André Bazin, ‘Pour un cinéma impur. Défense de l’adaptation’, in *qu’est-ce que le cinéma ?* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1999), pp. 81-106. Rohmer’s articles were initially published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, numbers 44, 49, 51, 52 and 53 (1955). They have recently been reedited in book form together with a more recent interview with Rohmer which continues his reflexions on the relations between cinema

an art form with its own canon of masterpieces, literature as a model and an institution continued to be both shunned and drawn upon. The notion of ‘auteur’ and its related graphological tropes – writing, *caméra-stylo*, textuality – are revealingly double-edged: from Astruc to the *Nouvelle Vague* and beyond, the prestige of literature is enlisted to promote and legitimise cinema while, in the same breath, filmmakers and theoreticians seek to liquidate literary heritage and replace it with cinematic authorship.<sup>10</sup>

As a director coming from experimental cinema, Akerman’s work of the 1970s is characterised by a marked resistance to conventional forms of narrative, played out amongst others in a tension between sound and image tracks. In her debut film, *Saute ma ville*, for instance, a disembodied voice, at times humming, laughing, shrieking and whining, accompanies the disturbing bodily rites of a young girl (played by Akerman herself) in a state of mental implosion. With its changes of pace, grain and volume, this multi-textured, but largely non-verbal voice-over gives aural form to the character’s emotional distress, but it cannot be reduced to some form of internal monologue.<sup>11</sup> Sound and image are often desynchronised, most disturbingly so in the final scene after the girl’s suicide, when the voice intonates a few childish notes before becoming extinct, whilst the camera has already cut to a black leader. Rather than fulfilling the illustrative, suturing function of sound that is an imperative of mainstream cinema, the sound-track colours the images emotionally, but it also to a certain extent exceeds them. In similarly disjunctive mode, the epistolary *News from Home* welds images of the American metropolis with the voice-over of Akerman reading letters from her mother in Brussels.<sup>12</sup> The voice takes precedence over the visual scenery, yet it is also threatened by effacement: the swelling chorus of the city’s multifarious sounds – a symphony of cars, screeching subway trains, and passers-by – drown the young woman’s delivery. Just like her body, that is never seen on screen, her voice risks being dissolved by the anonymous city space. This experimental *Symphony of a Metropolis*,<sup>13</sup> indebted to cinema’s silent era as much as to American underground cinema, forsakes any traditional narrative organisation, privileging instead pure vision and enunciation. Akerman explains:

dans mon film, il n’y a pas de héros et pas de narration classique. Ça fonctionne ailleurs, sur des rythmes, des pulsations, sur le regard, une image en amène une autre, c’est comme dans la musique, tu sais des notes, là tu suis des images, tu ne peux faire qu’une chose, regarder, écouter, et cela te met en question comme spectateur.<sup>14</sup>

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and its sister arts – the novel, painting, poetry, music, and architecture: *Le Celluloïd et le marbre* (Paris: Leo Scheer, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> On this point see Cléder, *Entre littérature et cinéma*, pp. 63-71.

<sup>11</sup> As Jean-Michel Frodon has suggested, the voice becomes a character in its own right, evoking the spectral presence of an Other – an absent lover, the camera, or even death itself – which ominously lingers over the action. Jean-Michel Frodon, ‘Saute ma ville’, in *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste*, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> On *News from Home* and the influence of her mother on her work see a recent interview with Ricky D’Ambrose about her films from the 1970s: [mubi.com/notebook/posts/tag/Chantal%20Akerman](http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/tag/Chantal%20Akerman) (accessed 30 November 2013).

<sup>13</sup> The title is borrowed from Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin - Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927), one of the iconic examples of the *city symphony film* genre.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Martine Storti, ‘Un entretien avec Chantal Akerman’, *Libération*, 20 June 1977.

The flattened out, yet rhythmical delivery of the letters, in analogy to structuralist filmmaking practices, foregrounds the text's concrete materiality: the density, grain and pattern of the voice take precedence over the content.

The insubordination of text to image in these early films, in tune with the goals of experimental filmmaking of the time, postulates Akerman's cinema as *cinematic*; in other words, as free as possible from the imperatives of narrative and, thus, from literary models. But the conflicting relations between sound and image tracks are also emblematic of a wider tension between image and story that informs Akerman's work. As Jean Cléder points out, together with Antonioni, Cassavettes, Duras, Straub and Huillet, Wim Wenders and others, Akerman is part of a group of independent filmmakers in the 1960s and 70s who lend visibility to the tension between narrative on the one hand and pure visual presence on the other.<sup>15</sup> For these directors, the slowing-down or total suppression of action becomes a powerful tool in their resistance to the mercenary (commercial) role of cinema as mere entertainment. Against the narrative-driven, action-packed plots favoured by the society of the spectacle, Akerman *et al.* uphold the image as a category 'in itself'. What is at stake here, Cléder points out, is not only the ontology of the cinematic image (as it was defined by Bazin), but also a political act: 'Engager l'image contre l'histoire dans ces années-là, c'est engager le réel contre le récit, pour postuler l'émergence d'un sens dépris du langage verbal et des protocoles de la narrativité – il s'agit donc immédiatement d'un acte politique inassignable à quelque mouvement politique'.<sup>16</sup>

In Akerman's experimental works, word and image, sound and pure visuality, are engaged in a persistent struggle for autonomy. Sound may assert its independence from the image track as in the films discussed, but, inversely, visuality seems to trump sound at the risk of annihilating it altogether. Both her first experimental documentary, *Hotel Monterey* (1972), and the first part of her documentary tetralogy on time, space and memory, *D'Est*, are without dialogue; the first is silent altogether. The director's affinity with silent film is playfully alluded to in the burlesque *L'Homme à la valise* (1983), both through the use of inter-titles and Akerman's Chaplinesque acting style (in this film commissioned for television, she once again doubles up as filmmaker and actress). Whilst the majority of her films do contain dialogues, their distribution tends to be uneven and their delivery linguistically 'marked'. Akerman often proceeds by blocks of dialogue or monologue that sit uncomfortably next to other sequences with little or no verbal interaction. In the autofictional *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), for instance, friends, family and strangers lengthily confide in Anna, a Belgian-Jewish filmmaker, in a series of extended monologues. The avoidance of the habitual shot /countershot device for these encounters cinematically underlines the crisis of communication – emblematic of a more widespread disarray in post-war European identity – amongst the characters. Anna speaks seldom, but, when she does verbally engage with others, repeatedly transgresses social convention to comically jarring effect. This uneven, unilateral distribution of speech and the characters' frequent misjudgement of social context are part of a wider strategy of defamiliarisation, which is also reflected in the stylised mode of address. In stark opposition to the naturalised diction practised by mainstream cinema (where dialogues are presented as if they were spoken in the 'real world'), Akerman 'textualises' speech, as if to remind her audiences of their grounding in the written text of the film script or other such underlying texts that have

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<sup>15</sup> *Entre littérature et cinéma*, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

generated the filmic world. It is interesting in this context that the director herself ascribes the particular rhythm of her dialogues and also of some letters in her films to her experience of attending synagogue as a child and listening to Jewish songs and prayers<sup>17</sup> – thus, to the oral recitation of the *siddur*, the traditional Jewish prayer book.

Given the strongly written, textualised nature of her dialogues, it is tempting to describe Akerman's work as 'cinéma littéraire' and thus to see it in the same vein as directors like Bresson, Duras, Resnais, Rohmer and Robbe-Grillet, even though the representational strategies and thematic concerns of her films may differ quite considerably. 'Film littéraire', a quintessentially French genre, Francis Vanoye explains, is characterised by:

la présence d'un texte très écrit, donné à lire ou à entendre selon un mode de diction volontiers sophistiqué, voire ostentatoire, ainsi que dans des formes narratives complexes. [...] Mais l'écriture cinématographique ne le cède en rien au littéraire, dans ces œuvres, et c'est ce qui assure cet effet de dédoublement textuel qui nous paraît caractériser le genre.<sup>18</sup>

Akerman's dramas of the everyday are in all evidence far removed from the sophisticated, theatrical language of *Hiroshima mon amour* or *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, and just as far (though perhaps closer in sensitivity) from the refined verbal offerings of *Ma nuit chez Maude* (1969) or *Le Genou de Claire* (1970). Hers, and this also distinguishes her from figures like Duras and Robbe-Grillet, is a cinema of the prosaic, where the purely phatic function of language has its part to play just like the mundane dialogues about shopping, eating, and family life that so mercilessly capture the female condition in her early work. Yet, her texts are no less written and 'marked', in particular in their double articulation as surprisingly intricate, intimate exchanges. In *Jeanne Dielman*, for instance, Delphine Seyrig pronounces with the same litany-like diction on her son's schoolwork and on sex. Dialogue in Akerman's films is characterised by, what, with Yvone Margulies, one could call an 'exceptional typicality.'<sup>19</sup> It is humdrum and anchored in the everyday, but nonetheless mesmerising in its chant; oral and written; flat and textured; literary and prosaic; 'ça et ça' rather than 'ça ou ça', as the director, in deconstructive mode, advocates as her world view<sup>20</sup> – just like her films, which vacillate between visuality and textuality, the cinematic and the written, abstraction and narrative. Akerman's cinema, then, is 'literary' in the most noble sense of the word: it combines literary and cinematic languages of the highest ambition in a consistent collision and cross-fertilisation between the two media.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste*, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Vanoye, *L'Adaptation littéraire au cinéma* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Yvone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste*, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> In the context of Bresson and of Huillet and Straub, who have all exercised an influence on Akerman, Rancière makes the following enlightening remark on the cross-over between the literary, the visual and the theatrical which also holds true for Akerman: 'Littérarité, cinématographie et théâtralité apparaissent alors non comme le propre d'arts spécifiques mais comme des figures esthétiques, des rapports entre la puissance des mots et celle du visible, entre les enchaînements des histoires et les mouvements des corps, qui traversent les frontières assignées aux arts. *Les Ecartés du cinéma*, p. 19.



## Selfportrait in Progress

Over a highly diversified career, Akerman has been engaged in a project of memory and self-representation where traditional genre boundaries are stretched and new forms of thinking the self – be it in written or audio-visual form – are experimented with. An early film like *Je tu il elle*, which centres around the fluidity of gender and sexual identities, is emblematic of the distanced approach she takes to self-representation. Though the director also plays the main lead, in the title credits the actress (i.e. herself) is listed as 'Julie', in a playful gesture of splitting between the biographical self and its performative incarnation. In Akerman's work 'je' is resolutely 'une autre', even if her oeuvre accumulates references to her family and her personal life. Whilst her filmic self-representations have generated considerable interest amongst critics,<sup>22</sup> her autofictional *récit Une famille à Bruxelles*, apart from scarce mentions, has hardly had any critical response so far. Yet this intimate text, especially read in tandem with her moving image work, is of considerable interest: it not only complements her filmic project of self-representation, but, incorporated into several multi-media installations, gives it a new impetus and direction.

*Une famille à Bruxelles* is the story of a close-knit family's coming to terms with the severe illness and death of the father, the only character to be named in the narrative. The text empathetically evokes the brutal way in which the mother's life in particular is upended by suffering and loss and examines the different family members' strategies for coping both as individuals and as a family unit. Reminiscent of Marguerite Duras and Thomas Bernhard in its brooding, labyrinthine style, the entangled narrative ruminates over the characters' fears, family rites, conflicts and releases in a process Akerman herself has called 'ressassement'.<sup>23</sup> The pared-down style, insistent repetition and incantatory rhythm endow the text with a singular dramatic intensity, despite its grounding in the quotidian. Akerman's supple prose, like her camera work, goes *under* the image. It captures the characters' affects and *tropismes*, without ever seeking to engage in any kind of character psychology. Parallels with the director's own family – the older daughter is a filmmaker living in Ménilmontant just like the author; the mother is an Auschwitz survivor whose family has perished in the camps; the father is called Jacques, like Akerman's father – strongly hint at the autobiographical nature of the narrative, yet Akerman shuns any conventional autobiographical pact. Rather like Proust, whose *Prisonnière* she adapted in 1999 and who is one of the tutelary figures of her work, she inscribes the text in an uncertain generic space where autobiography and fiction blend.<sup>24</sup> As the deindividuated title *Une famille à Bruxelles* suggests, the text transcends personal experience in favour of a wider meditation on loss, mourning and the family unit.

The book opens on a markedly visual scene:

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<sup>22</sup> See for instance Alisa Lebow, 'Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman's *D'Est*', *Camera Obscura*, 18-52 (2003), 34-83; Maureen Turim, 'Personal Pronouncements in *I... You... He... She* and *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels*', in Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, ed., *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), pp. 9-26 and my *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> The ending, by explicitly raising the question of the text's veracity, upsets the truth value that we commonly associate with the autobiographical act: '[ma fille de Ménilmontant] raconte des tas d'histoires et pas toutes sont vraies mais il y en a qui sont vraies et en général ce sont des histoires tristes pas des histoires qui font rire, celles qui font rire elle les raconte aussi quand on est ensemble et quand ça lui revient et elles ne sont pas toujours vraies non plus mais parfois elles le sont'. Chantal Akerman, *Une famille à Bruxelles*, p. 88.

Et puis je *vois* encore un grand appartement presque vide à Bruxelles. Avec juste une femme souvent en peignoir. Une femme qui vient de perdre son mari. C'est drôle je ne *vois* pas cette femme dehors pourtant elle sort parfois, elle marche dans la rue, elle attend le tram. Je la *vois* surtout au téléphone et devant sa télévision couchée dans un divan avec parfois un journal devant elle.<sup>25</sup>

Given the identity of the author, it is difficult not to visualise this incipit as the first establishing shots of a film narrative, an uncanny variation on *Jeanne Dielman*, which similarly staged the lonely existence of a widow in her Brussels flat. The strangely placed 'encore' in the opening sentence reinforces the sense of 'déjà-vu' corroborated some ten pages later by a passage about the autonomy women can gain from driving a car which strongly resonates with one of the letters from *Jeanne Dielman*. As already in her play *Hall de nuit*, which echoes scenes from *Hotel Monterey* and *Nuit et jour* (1991), literary and filmic narratives enter into implicit dialogue here. Initially, the story seems to be told from the perspective of the older daughter, whom we identify as the 'je' of the opening paragraph, yet, quickly and without any transition, the point of view shifts to the mother, who now speaks in the first person. Throughout the text, 'je' is occupied alternately by mother and daughter in a criss-crossing of voices and perspectives which undoes any stable notion of identity. Sudden changes in possessive adjectives ('ma fille' / 'sa fille' ) further destabilise the narrative point of view by shifting it towards an omniscient perspective in a vertiginous toing and froing between internal and external focalisation, 'moi', 'toi' et 'lui', closeness and distance. These displacements of point of view not only allow Akerman to offer a more complex portrait of her family and herself; they also enable her (as in her filmic work) to reflect on the pressures the gaze of the 'Other' – the parents, the extended family unit – exercise on the individual. The narrative strategies in *Une famille à Bruxelles* are immediately reminiscent of Duras's autobiographical novel *L'Amant*, which similarly shifts between subject and object positions, inside and outside view. Yet the double occupancy of the 'je' by both mother and daughter in Akerman's text, beyond the schizoid 'je/ elle' of female alienation, also hints at a wider crisis of emancipation with regard to the mother that already informed a film like *News from Home*. As Akerman comments herself, 'je n'ai pas réussi la transition vers l'âge adulte, comme on dit. Il paraît que cela se sent très fortement dans *Une famille à Bruxelles* où l'on ne sait pas si c'est la mère ou la fille qui parle. Ainsi il semble que la séparation a échoué.'<sup>26</sup>

*Une famille à Bruxelles* exists in triple medial form as a book, a play and a CD, but it is also incorporated in the video installation *Selfportrait/ Autobiography: A Work in Progress*, one of Akerman's first video works exhibited at the Frith Street Gallery, London, in 1998. The installation consists of edited passages from four iconic Akerman films – *D'Est, Toute une nuit* (1982), *Jeanne Dielman*, and *Hotel Monterey* – distributed over six monitors organised in the form of a triangle. Each extract is accompanied by its own soundtrack overlaid by the voice of the artist who reads *Une famille à Bruxelles*. The duration of the reading corresponds to a complete cycle of the installation. The voice-over serves as a matrix which stitches together and puts in relation the disparate images of people queuing in the snow from *D'Est*, Jeanne Dielman attending to her domestic tasks, guests emerging out of a hotel lift in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7 (my emphasis).

<sup>26</sup> Akerman, 'Neben seinen Schnürsenkeln in einem leeren Kühlschrank laufen', p. 75 (my translation).

*Hotel Monterey* and so forth, pointing to their interconnectedness as traces and testimonies of our diverse human existence. The fictional, the biographical and the documentary are welded together in a constant displacement between 'me' and 'you', which opens the images and their accompanying sound track to a quasi infinite number of connections and reconfigurations. The installation is 'in progress' in the sense that it is in a permanent state of becoming.<sup>27</sup> As comments Cyril Beghin:

Le père, on le cherche partout dans les images; la mère, elle occupe les écrans de *Jeanne Dielman* mais aussi chaque apparition de femme sur les lignes de fuite de l'installation. Le sens est en constante expansion: les textures très riches de ce qui est dit comme de ce qui est vu s'entrecroisent non pour se serrer et trouver des nœuds de montage, mais au contraire s'espacer, relâcher dans leurs tensions respectives la maille des attributions de corps, d'action et d'histoires.<sup>28</sup>

The more recent installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* created for the Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris, in 2004 and subsequently shown in the Jewish Museum, Berlin, and in the Camden Arts Centre, London, likewise combines the written with the visual, but this time in more overtly autobiographical form. Like the autofictional feature *Demain on déménage* released the same year, the installation revolves around the diary of Akerman's maternal grandmother, an amateur painter who perished in Auschwitz. In the first room, texts written by Akerman herself about the cinema as well as selected phrases from the diary are projected onto a white, diaphanous tulle spiral. The semi-obscure of the room, combined with the shadows that spectators' bodies project on the spiral and walls, suffuse this room with a spectral, mournful atmosphere. As Edna Moshenson comments, this part of the installation is 'a cinematic autobiography of sorts, which contains her [Akerman's] thoughts about the cinema and the power of the cinematic image; about the Second Commandment that forbids the making of graven images; about her work and about what has nourished and motivated her.'<sup>29</sup> At the centre of the second room is a projection of the diary on the same diaphanous material. Behind this screen, audiences access another projection: a split-image documentary of the director and her mother, Natalia Akerman, who translates the diary from Polish and, for the first time, shares her experience in Auschwitz with her daughter. Moshenson points out further that the installation marks a crucial step in Akerman's approach to self-representation: 'Taken together, the two parts of the installation [...] summarize years of creative work in which Akerman searched for a way to replace an invented memory and autobiography with a reconstruction of her family biography through a process of opening up and talking, acceptance and reconciliation with the past.'<sup>30</sup>

In interviews and *Autoportrait en cinéaste*, Akerman repeatedly hints at the role her mother's silence about the camps has had on her filmmaking. The incomplete passing down of stories from one generation to the next, she explains, prompted her to invent false memories – alternative fictions, indeed an alternative autobiography – that were to act as a substitute for the blanks in her family history: 'Un enfant avec une histoire pleine de trous, ne peut que se réinventer une mémoire. [...] Alors

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<sup>27</sup> On the installation see Cyril Beghin's excellent 'Selfportrait - Autobiography in Progress', in *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste*, p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Edna Moshenson, 'Chantal Akerman: A Spiral Autobiography', in Edna Moshenson, ed., *Chantal Akerman: A Spiral Autobiography* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2006), p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

l'autobiographie dans tout ça ne peut être que réinventée.'<sup>31</sup> As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, who had no access to the memories of the parent generation, filmmaking allowed her to engage imaginatively and creatively with the silence that had weighed so heavily on her childhood: 'j'ai voulu remplir ce silence bruyant de bruyant silence, dans un espace-temps. J'ai voulu faire du cinéma.'<sup>32</sup> Whilst works like *Histoires d'Amerique* (1988) and *D'Est* grapple with her traumatic family history indirectly – Alisa Lebow calls them 'transitive autobiographies'<sup>33</sup> – in more recent years the director has moved to more personal forms of engagement. Yet, in order to speak and represent that which for a long term she considered to be non-representable, she continues to follow the oblique, hybridised representational strategies she mentions in the early interview with Godard. Video art as a multimedia format allows her to put in conversation the heterogeneous materials of her creation – documentary 'bordering on fiction', feature, experimental writing – and, through this (self-)relational process, to open them up to new significations. By recomposing texts and images in space, the installation creates a new context for the reception of the artwork highlighting its fluidity and mobility. As Vivian Sky Rehberg explains, visitors to the museum or the gallery space no longer apprehend the work through the collective, frontal viewing experience that is afforded in the cinema projection room; rather, they explore it as passers-by, thus entering into a different temporal and spatial register.<sup>34</sup> The new context of the installation encourages spectators to revisit and reinterpret her work:

When Akerman reworks a film for an installation, she invites the spectator to participate in a collective act of historical and autobiographical re-reading and re-interpretation of her own production. Displaced from imposed chronologies, and released from the linear temporal progression of 24 frames per second, as well as from the conventions of storytelling in narrative and documentary cinema, Akerman's installations appear as fragments in a constantly moving history in the making, one that engages the history of art and the history of cinema, as well as her own life story.<sup>35</sup>

In its blending between the biographical and the fictional and its collision between text and moving image, the labyrinthine, multiple installation space makes tangible that which one medium alone could not express. Distanced but nonetheless intimate, shifting its point of view and opening itself up to new configurations, the moving image installation constructs a different set of significations, *under* the images already inscribed. From the impurity of cinema, Akerman, this most versatile of artists, has moved to 'impure cinema' – in the meaning given to the term by Bazin, that is, an encounter between cinema and the other arts<sup>36</sup> – in a creative process that resolutely refuses boundaries and closure.

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<sup>31</sup> *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> For an excellent discussion of oblique strategies of (self-)representation in Akerman's *D'Est*, see her 'Memory Once Removed'.

<sup>34</sup> 'Tant qu'il est encore temps/ While There Is Still Time', in *Chantal Akerman. Too Far, Too Close* (Antwerp: Ludion, M HKA, 2012), p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> See his seminal article 'Pour un cinéma impur'.

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