


Between home and flight: interior space, time and desire in the films of Chantal Akerman

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to review the films of Chantal Akerman, mainly those that she made in the 1970s and 1980s, observing how her filmmaking formulates a journey to and from the home against the background of the historical scene post 1968. Through a selection of examples, I will argue that the singularities of her filmmaking—the exploration of suspended time, the preference for a frontal gaze at the female body, or the inclination to autobiography, being the most noteworthy traits—have their basis in her critical observation of the life of women in social spaces, and also in a commitment to their emancipation through desire. Seen in perspective, the path that Akerman takes is one of unstable—though coherent—movement through the rejection of domesticity as the place from which the oppression of women originates, the flight from this (in other words, nomadism), and a search for other interiors that function as the opposite of the family home. These other interiors are empty and anonymous rooms where time and the rules that govern society are suspended, where Akerman herself, or other characters who are her alter ego, go from one corporeal state to another, carrying out the basic activities of the body, such as eating, sleeping or having sex.

KEYWORDS

Chantal Akerman; interior; body; desire; journey; feminism

Introduction: Chantal Akerman's phenomenological vein, or the importance of space and the body in her cinema

In her extensive genealogy of the uses of the bedroom throughout history, Michelle Pierrot reflected on the particularity of the women's bedroom, a space that is especially complex as it has been assigned many functions and practices. The bedroom is a space of great interest to this historian, above all because of the changing ways in which it has been conceived by those same women who have inhabited it over time:

The bedroom is a woman's sacred space par excellence. Everything contrives to isolate them there: religion, domesticity, morality, decency, modesty. [...] [Because of this,] contemporary feminists vigorously contested the idea of enclosure as being intrinsic to women's 'nature'. They claimed the practice of traveling and nomadism as a philosophy and a way of life. [But] the bedroom has [also] been claimed by many women of all ages and diverse conditions, from the woman who works at home to the writer [...] even the liberated women of 1968 ... [...] It swings from a place of constraint to one of freedom, between duty and desire, real and imaginary – distinctions that are difficult to distinguish in the semi-darkness, where boundaries are blurred.¹

The career of Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman during the 1970s and 1980s can be read in the light of these words. The journey revealed by her films encapsulates the

particular story of rejections and affinities that exist between women and the private room. Conceived in the period after the events of 1968, her films are as interested in exploring interiors, in evoking "houses, rooms, and notions of domesticity and seclusion",² as they are in transcending the spatial limits of those same interiors in various ways, including flight, nomadism, and even destruction. As a whole, her filmography can be understood as an exercise in "dialectics between interior and exterior spaces",³ as a constant movement between public and private spaces, between the city and the rooms it contains.

My aim in this article is to examine this continual oscillation, which reverberates in her films, between the longing the female characters feel to escape and immerse themselves in the streets, fleeing the home, and the need, afterwards, to find shelter in suitable spaces, conceived as places of experimentation and desire, non-domestic hideaways in which to ponder the alienating logic and time that govern life (that were particularly harsh against women). Using a selection of examples, I will thus follow that route—not chronological but well-defined—that her heroines outline: leaving the home to reject it, to the point of making it explode, going out to the exterior and moving through the thresholds of modern cities, moved by the desire to find the one they love or another yearned-for subject. For here is a second

down that clashes with the surrounding reality, with any sociality, as well as any heroic, vertical, masculinized or phallic image of the film director.⁵⁵ Indeed, turning the camera around on oneself is to show oneself in the act of working, filming oneself in full productive process. But, here Akerman goes beyond the affirmation of the creative work of women, of their voice. Playing with contradiction and setting out a cinema made of minimal quotidian acts, she claims a right to laziness, to eroticism, to quietude, to the enjoyment of the room itself, to the sensorial pleasure of the small and the bodily and of the freeing-up of time. Thus, her films continue to breathe this atmosphere of liberation of life that was so much a part of '68, leading to a still relevant reflection on the correspondence between work and desire.

Conclusion

To conclude, I can say that paying attention to elements that could be considered as phenomenological (space, time and body movements) in Chantal Akerman's films is a useful strategy that throws new light on her filmography. Hers is a cinema that participates in the women's cause by using tools that go beyond speech and voice to focus on something as simple as the body in the time and spaces of everyday life. This is why interiors are so important in her cinema: because it is in interiors that we spend most of our lives and, as a matter of fact, many women carry out their (paid or unpaid) work. Akerman's filmmaking moves through all the states and possibilities of the inside, and of the postures of the body and the feminine subjectivity in them. Not only did she fully participate in the condemnation of domesticity and of work so typical of the seventies, but also, in a more complete and interesting sense, she condenses that double movement of leaving and returning to the interior, which is, above all, a movement of rejection and refoundation. The point is that, since hers is a cinema that is interested in desire, it is also a cinema that inevitably accepts the contradictions and ambivalent states to which it leads.

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Notes

1. Michelle Perrot, *The Bedroom: An Intimate History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 112, 114–115, 147.
2. Steven Jacobs “Semiotics of the Living Room: Domestic Interiors in Chantal Akerman's Cinema” in *Chantal Akerman: Too Far, Too Close. Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Antwerp* (Belgium: Ludion; Muhka, 2012), 73.
3. *Ibid*, 76.
4. Bérenice Reynaud, “These Shoes are Made for Walking,” *Afterall*, n.º 6 (Reynaud 2002): 51.
5. In her essay “Women's Time”, Julia Kristeva established a strong connection between the emergence of the feminist movement after May 1968 and the mistrust of the linear and teleological models of history considered until then. This essay serves as a context for Akerman's work and is in tune with the manipulation of different temporalities (fluid or plural) that she displays in her films. See Julia Kristeva, “Women's Time,” *Signs* 7, nº 1 (Kristeva 1981): 13–35.
6. For the urban vein in modern cinema in general see Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies. 1939–1990* (London: Routledge, Sorlin 2004). On the importance of bringing cameras to the city ground in the *Nouvelle Vague* movement see Jean Douchet, *Nouvelle Vague* (Paris: Fernand Hazan, Sorlin 2004). The inclination towards urban everyday life in the cinema of the 1960s—both in Parisian cinema and in that which, in parallel, flourished in New York—has been studied in Juan Antonio Suárez “Styles of occupation: Manhattan in experimental film and video from the 1970s to the present” in Cooke, Lynne, y Douglas Crimp. *Mixed Use, Manhattan Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present* (New York: MIT Press, Cooke and Crimp 2010).
7. On the transition from the street to the interior, or rather on the extension of the political struggle into the private sphere from 1968 onwards, see André Habib, “La rue est entrée dans la chambre!: Mai 68, la rue et l'intimité dans *The Dreamers* et *Les amants réguliers*,” *Cinémas. Revue d'études cinématographiques*, no 1 (Habib 2010): 59–77.
8. On the affective turn and the inclination towards reduced spaces in French cinema immediately after 1968, see Doménec Font, “En la órbita post-Nouvelle Vague. La Cicatriz Interior,” [“In the post-Nouvelle Vague orbit. The Inner Scar”] in *En torno a la Nouvelle Vague. Rupturas y horizontes de la modernidad*. (Valencia: Filmoteca de Valencia, Font 2003), 370–71. And María Velasco, *Les enfants perdus. El cine independiente francés. Pialat, Eustache, Doillon y Garrel* (Madrid: Ediciones JC, Velasco 2012). On the other hand, an overview of the cinema made by women after 1968 can be found in François Audé, *Ciné-modèles, cinéma d'elles: situations de femmes dans le cinéma français, 1956–1979*, (Lausanne, Éditions l'Age d'homme, Françoise 1981). In addition, Ann Kaplan's important study on women and cinema points out that the authors of the 1970s she analyses (Marguerite Duras, Yvonne Rainer, Laura Mulvey etc.) address the problem of female subjectivity in indoor spaces, often associated with the roles imposed on women. In her

- influential essay, she draws parallels between independent films made by women in the USA and those made in Europe—especially in France and Great Britain. This international exchange is very reminiscent of Chantal Akerman's own work, always halfway between the New York and the European scenes. See Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film. Both sides of the camera* (New York: Routledge, Kaplan 1983), 83–200.
9. Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, Schmid 2010), 6.
 10. Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity beyond French Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 143.
 11. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Deleuze 1997), 195–197.
 12. Quoted in Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press), 42.
 13. It was precisely 1975 that was declared, by the UN, International Women's Year. Due to this, activities were carried out around the world but also protests against the deactivation of feminist struggles that the governments of wealthy countries, using this declaration as an excuse, tried to bring about. It is interesting to observe how, parallel to the whole theatre of official acts, feminist filmmakers chose either to document the protests of activist women, or to make films of this true quotidian life. Regarding this question see the catalogue: Nicole Fernández, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Giovanna Zapperi, et al., *Defiant Muses. Delphine Seyrig and Feminist Video Collectives in France in the 1970s and 1980s* (Madrid: MNCARS, Petrešin-Bachelez et al. 2019).
 14. Cybelle McFadden, *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maiwenn* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 88.
 15. Chantal Akerman, "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*," *Camera Obscura 2* (Autumn 1977): 119.
 16. Stated here: "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*" (Criterion Collection, Akerman 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pSNOEYSllg>. Minute 0:46.
 17. Chantal Akerman, "In Her Own Time: Interview with Miriam Rosen," in *The Cinematic (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)* (London: Whitechapel, Akerman 2007), 197.
 18. I have taken this idea from Margulies, *op. cit.*, 84.
 19. Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres II* (Paris: Gallimard, Valéry 1960), 379.
 20. Chantal Akerman, *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, Akerman 2004), 30–31 & 39. My translation.
 21. Deleuze, *op. cit.*, 196.
 22. Youssef Ishaghpour, *Cinéma contemporain de ce côté du miroir* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, Ishaghpour 1986), 261.
 23. Marguerite Duras, *Écrire* (Paris: Gallimard, Duras and Gauthier 1974), 13.
 24. Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, Duras and Gauthier 1974), 49 & 68.
 25. Spoken by Akerman, recorded by Janet Bergstrom, "Chantal Akerman y el espíritu de los años setenta" ["Chantal Akerman and the Spirit of the Seventies"], *Lectora*, n° 7 (Bergstrom 2001): 39 [My translation]. And she was not the only one. Years before, Simone de Beauvoir had written: "This escape, this sadomasochism in which woman persists against both objects and self, is often precisely sexual" (*The Second Sex*, New York: Vintage, 2011, 544).
 26. Margulies, *op. cit.*, 76 & 89.
 27. Taken from Marion Schmid, *op. cit.*, 45–46.
 28. Idea taken from Jean-François Chevrier, *Agir, Contempler* (Paris: Éditions ArtLys, Chevrier 2016), 134.
 29. Quotation taken from Akerman, *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste*, 178. My translation.
 30. Taken from Bergstrom, *op. cit.*, 35.
 31. See the already cited book by Margulies and this 1991 interview for French radio: "J'ai rencontré le cinéma en voyant *Pierrot le fou*": <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-nuits-de-france-culture/chantal-akerman-j-ai-rencontre-le-cinema-en-voyant-pierrot-le>
 32. McFadden, *op. cit.*, 89.
 33. Arnau Vilaro, "El deseo que movilizó el lenguaje, el cuerpo que visibilizó los hechos. La Nouvelle Vague, con y después del 68," ["The Desire that Mobilized Language, the Body that Made the Facts Visible. The New Wave, With and After 68"] in *Arte y Cine. Movimientos Artísticos y Cinematográficos Tras 1945* (Madrid: Cinestesia, Vilaro 2018), 50.
 34. Akerman's relationship with her mother has been studied in Griselda Pollock, "The Long Journey: Maternal Trauma, Tears and Kisses in a Work by Chantal Akerman," *Studies in the Maternal 2*, n° 1 (Pollock 2010): 1–32. Akerman herself wrote about it in *My Mother Laughs* (New York: The Song Cave, Akerman 2019).
 35. Akerman thus anticipates some postmodern women writers who, using categories from the philosophy of difference, favoured a fluid notion of being. Think, for example, of Braidotti when she writes: "... the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. [...] It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling." Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia, Braidotti 1994), 5.
 36. As I say, after the departure, when the time comes the characters take up their relation with the world again from afar. Thus the presence of letters and phone calls in Akerman's films is both overwhelming and meaningful: those that arrive for Jeanne, those that Akerman reads in *News from Home* (1977), those she writes in *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974), presumably to her lover, or the calls to another lover that the protagonist of *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978) does not manage to make, or those in *Là-bas* (2006), that constitute the protagonist's only human contact.
 37. Akerman, *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste*, 52. My translation.
 38. Akerman, *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste*, 173.
 39. The relationship between these artists has been worked out in Lynne Cooke, *Ellipsis: Chantal*

- Akerman, *Lili Dujourie, Francesca Woodman* (Lund: Lund Konsthall, Cooke 2008).
40. On the occupation of marginal spaces by artists in the 1970s, see Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp, *Mixed Use, Manhattan Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present* (New York: MIT Press, Cooke and Crimp 2010).
 41. On phenomenological and psychedelic visual experimentation in both the film and art of the sixties and seventies that sought to broaden human perception, see: Diedrich Diederichsen, *Psicodelia y Ready-Made* (Buenos Aires: Ana Hidalgo, Diederichsen 2011), 12–45. And Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton & Co., Youngblood 1970), 75–135.
 42. Catherine Fowler, *The Films of Chantal Akerman: A Cinema of Displacements*, (Doctoral dissertation), Warwick University, (Fowler 1995), 145–146. Retrieved from <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4048/>. In this text, Fowler explores the similarities and differences between some of Akerman's films (*Hôtel Monterey* and *News from Home*) and Snow's *Wavelength* in relation to the different use of zoom and framing and the consequences that this has on the narrative sense of each one's films.
 43. Margulies, *op. cit.*, 113. In her analysis, Margulies connect Akerman and Snow (and both of them with Godard), in relation to the death scene in their films (specifically, she associates *Wavelength* and *Jeanne Dielman*). Thus, according to her, while for Snow "the camera does not stop at the dead body but proceeds unblinkingly over it", in *Jeanne Dielman* the final murder is crucial to the meaning of the film. See *ibid.*, 81–83. Again, what I am trying to claim in bringing up these considerations is that questions of subjectivity pervade Akerman's approach. On the differences between Snow's structural cinema and Akerman's vision, see also Jacobs *op. cit.*, 74–75. On the other hand, a critique of the gaze in this film from a feminist point of view has been made by Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 70–84. This is, moreover, an important essay to orientate oneself in the feminist film practices of the 1970s and 1980s. In this book, Chantal Akerman's work should be placed alongside that of other authors such as Liliana Cavani, Michelle Citron, Marguerite Duras, VALIE EXPORT, Bette Gordon, Bonnie Klein, Babette Mangolte, Laura Mulvey, Ulrike Ottinger, Sally Potter, Yvonne Rainer, Jackie Raynal, Helke Sander.
 44. Margulies, *op. cit.*, 125 & 110.
 45. Magalie Genuite and Philippe Azoury, "Je, tu, il, elle," in *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, Genuite and Azoury 2004), 178.
 46. Chantal Akerman, "Je, tu, il, elle," in *Chantal Akerman* (Madrid: Filmoteca Española, Akerman 2005), 16.
 47. Akerman, *Chantal Akerman. Autoportrait en cinéaste*, 55.
 48. Ishaghpour, *op. cit.*, 264.
 49. To find out more about this stage of her career see Kenneth White, "Urban Unknown: Chantal Akerman in New York City," *Screen* 51, n° 4 (White 2010): 365–78.
 50. On this connection, see Margaret Iversen, "The World without a Self: Edward Hopper and Chantal Akerman," *Art History* 41 (Iversen 2018): 1–22.
 51. For more information on this film, see Maria Walsh, "Intervals of Inner Flight: Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*," *Screen* 45, n° 3 (Walsh 2004): 190–205.
 52. Margulies, *op. cit.*, 182.
 53. Serge Daney, "Toute une nuit," *Lumière* 1 (Daney 1982).
 54. *Sieben Frauen, Sieben Sünden (Seven Women, Seven Sins)* is a 1986 collective film produced between West Germany (FRG), France, Austria, Belgium-Belgium and USA. This "omnibus film" offers the point of view of seven women filmmakers on the meaning of the sins today. The film contains the following episodes that explore the different sins: Sloth: Chantal Akerman with *Portrait d'une Paresseuse*; Anger: Maxi Cohen with *Anger*; Lust: VALIE EXPORT with *Ein perfektes Paar oder die Unzucht wechselt ihre Haut*; Envy: Laurence Gavron with *Il Maestro*; Greed: Bette Gordon with *Greed Pay to Play*; Pride: Ulrike Ottinger with *Superbia Der Stolz*; And gluttony: Helke Sander with *Völlerei? Füttern!*
 55. It is true that this filming of oneself, more than being an exceptional feature of Akerman's, is a frequent method in art and audio-visuals of the period. Much of feminist cinema was governed by a narcissistic principle that organized the piece around the idea of capturing the body of the woman artist so that she was on both sides of the camera, working with it and posing for it. With this act they emphasized that it was they, the women themselves, the filmmakers, the video artists or the writers, that, in parallel to representing themselves as active, working subjects, would give their opinion on the image of women—I add writers, even though they do not have a camera, because it is not absurd to think that the writing about oneself of a Marguerite Duras or a Hélène Cixous is not far removed from this narcissistic aesthetic that was so well defined for video by Rosalind Krauss in "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, (Duras and Gauthier 1974), 50–64.

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Irene Valle-Corpas has a PhD in Art History from the University of Granada under the supervision of Manuel Borja-Villel (director of MNCARS) and Esperanza Guillén (University of Granada, Spain). She works on several research projects, one of them in the Pompeu Fabra University, where she did a Master's Degree in Comparative Studies. She has published articles on art historiography, cinema, contemporary art and urban space (that have appeared, among other journals, in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Boletín de arte ...*). She has been visiting researcher at EHESS and ENSBA in Paris and has been researcher at the *Residencia de Estudiantes* in Madrid.

Disclosure statement

I confirm that this article has not been published elsewhere and is not under the consideration of any other scientific journal. In addition to this, I want to point out that I have

no conflicts of interest to disclose. This article is an original reading of the films of Chantal Akerman, one of the most important authors in the feminist film scene, past and present. With a novel approach, it offers an interpretation of her main works from the 1970s and 1980s from the point of view of the affective experience of space, that is, according to the desire that this can unleash and/or repress, a central element in her particular way of understanding the social situation of women and the artistic creation associated with it, but one that has been historically neglected in most of the monographs that analyse her cinema.

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