

Identity slips: the autobiographical register in the work of Chantal Akerman

Article (Published Version)

Lebow, Alisa (2016) Identity slips: the autobiographical register in the work of Chantal Akerman. *Film Quarterly*, 70 (1). pp. 54-60. ISSN 0015-1386

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/61531/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

IDENTITY SLIPS: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REGISTER IN THE WORK OF CHANTAL AKERMAN

Alisa Lebow

“Your mother was the thin thread that kept you in balance.”
—Esther Orner¹

The loss of Chantal Akerman in October 2015 came as a shock. It was not unknown that she struggled with mental illness and, in particular, with bipolar disorder, and that for her, getting through every day was a victory. Yet the vision, vitality, and sheer volume of her filmmaking made one think that she had many more days left. Judging solely by the resoluteness of her images and the decisiveness of her style, she was a force. But decisiveness and resoluteness are themselves indeterminate indicators. And what her last film, *No Home Movie* (2015), revealed—already hinted at in *Là-bas* (*Down There*, 2006) and elsewhere—was that the brilliant filmmaker was hanging on by the thinnest and most frayed of lifelines.

Watching *No Home Movie* after Akerman's death is an exercise in the state of afterwardness—that awkward translation of what Freud called *nachträglichkeit* (or *après coup* in French)—with all of its shuttling anachronic temporalities in play. The trauma of her death is now overlaid upon the experience of watching, and the film itself, despite its having been finished months prior to her death, can only be seen now through the scrim of her suicide, as a knowing or unknowing farewell. There is no longer any way to view the work within a string of before and afters, a moment in time on a continuum that will have its antecedents and follow-ups. The film stands as a sentinel at the gates of her passing, with nothing but pastness through which to view it, and without the consolation that its disturbing and disturbed address might be redressed some day by another, more sure-footed, attempt.

No Home Movie leaves the impression that this already minimalist filmmaker had pared down her filmmaker's set of tools to the bare minimum: no more need for artifice or

surrogates, for sets or actors, multiple screens, or even a script. The film appears deceptively as a footnote in the career of a much more ambitious and complex auteur, yet it should not be dismissed so easily. That it is a film about her mother's death is obvious. That it is autobiographical, in an expanded sense, also goes without saying. However, *No Home Movie* ultimately reveals within itself all of the filmmaker's earlier attempts to reframe the (m)other as self-portraits of an un-*heimlich* (one interpretation of the “no home” of the title) and devastating metempsychosis—an aspect worth probing further.

No Home Movie opens with a four-minute shot of a flimsy treetop being ferociously blown by an insistent desert wind. The harsh winds that thrash at the fragile leaves clinging desperately to the precarious tree can now only be understood as a palimpsestic double metaphor, standing in, at the same time, and in much the same way, for the mother who first clings to and then lets slip the life force within her, and just as convincingly, for the filmmaker who is barely holding on as she helplessly watches her mother let go, and then less than one year later, gives way herself. With its frail branches tossed mercilessly in the relentless gale winds, the tree doesn't stand a chance in the face of such decisive oppositional force. Eventually, it too must cede to the pressures that bear down, fast and furious, upon its valiant yet ultimately defeated will. The mother and her daughter both succumb to the encroachments of a death as certain as it is non-negotiable, the first through the vicissitudes of age and disease, the second by force of an intractable loss. This doubling and ultimate collapse of metaphor veritably makes both deaths inevitable, the daughter's overwhelming loss being one of a self anaclitically paired to the point of thoroughgoing identification with the mother.

No Home Movie is clearly far more than an homage to a dying mother, and more too than a swan song. It can be seen, in part, as the distillation of an entire oeuvre, artlessly yet honestly reduced to its most elemental form, with nearly all the tropes of a four-decade-long career present—borders, exile, duration, waiting, transience, Jewishness, home—and

Film Quarterly, Vol. 70, Number 1, pp. 54–60, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.
© 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2016.70.1.54.



No Home Movie opening shot.

none more so than the trope of the mother. As Akerman herself acknowledges in Marianne Lambert's documentary, *I Don't Belong Anywhere: The Cinema of Chantal Akerman* (2015), made in the year of her death and a year after her mother's: "I realized that deep down my mother was at the heart of my work." She adds chillingly, "That's why now I'm afraid. I think that now that my mother is no longer there, there's nothing left."

So when the filmmaker, who famously never ties her shoes, ties her shoes toward the end of *No Home Movie*, the scene falsely resolves that which was never going to be resolved, or perhaps it resolves it all too well. With the death of Chantal Akerman's mother and muse came the end of her daughter's filmmaking and of her life. And while it is true that Akerman's films have, from the start and throughout, been motivated by and obsessed with the figure, present or absent, of the mother, prior to this last film, audiences had hardly ever been admitted into the tense and impossible dynamic itself, only to its substitutes and its effects.

No Home Movie offers up an utterly overblown affair of sweetness and warmth between two parties relatively ill-suited to the task. Akerman, who could be quite irascible and mercurial, and at the very least, impatient, unwittingly adopts, in relation to her mother, the persona of a patient and doting daughter/mother. Her mother, Nelly (Natalia Akerman), reciprocates with bemused yet free-flowing affection, across distances never fully overcome despite the technological interventions employed. Chantal films their Skype sessions, and when the mother questions her twice as to why she's always filming their sessions, Chantal gives two answers, the first "because I want to show that there is no distance in the world," and the second, "I film everyone," but, "of course, you especially, more than others." The double mediation (Skype and the filming of it) does not actually mitigate but

rather amplifies the distance, but the second response, "of course you more than others," rings far more true.

The distance that Akerman says she wants to efface actually remains stubbornly in place. It is the distance, in fact, that seems to allow their gushing intimacy. There is quite a difference between how the two women relate across the fibre optic channels versus when they are in the same physical space. The streams of effusive affection, the sobriquets and indulgent tone occur mainly during the periods of physical distance and the doubled mediation: Chantal repeatedly calls her mother "Mamiko," speaking in a sweetly charged voice, as if to a beloved child, and the mother tells her when she smiles a certain way, "I want to squeeze you in my arms." This cascade of affect evaporates into a trickle when they're proximate.

Face-to-face they tend to be more reserved, taking the measure of the other and maintaining a distance, both physical and emotional. One surmises it is precisely the same distance (not too close, not too far) that has come to characterize Akerman's signature style.²

Janet Bergstrom recognized early on, in one of the very best essays on Akerman's work, that this celebrated "keeping a distance" is much more than simply a formal element.³ She saw it, quite rightly, as a sign of the process of "splitting," insisting that there is an unconscious motive rather than a strictly aesthetic one. To explain the distance symptomatically, Bergstrom invokes psychoanalyst André Green's theory of "the dead mother," which refers to a mother who in fact is not dead, but who is so emotionally damaged and affectless that the child experiences her psychically as if she were. Bergstrom quotes Green at length:

[A]fter having experienced the loss of the mother's love and the threat of the loss of the mother herself and after he [sic] has fought against anxiety by various active methods, amongst which agitation, insomnia and nocturnal terrors are indications, the ego will deploy a series of defences of a different kind . . . The first and most important is a unique movement with two aspects: *the decathexis of the maternal object and the unconscious identification with the dead mother.*⁴

As if to reiterate how aptly the theory might be applied to Akerman, Green even elaborates in an interview that most of his patients who suffered from the dead mother syndrome had difficulty relating to others yet were generally extremely creative. He states:

These subjects have chosen creativity over the love relationship, maybe to become independent from the object; the object, after all, can stop loving you; one moment, the

object is there, at another moment, it has disappeared. There is a joy in creativity, but I think that there is this constant threat that you won't be able to go beyond.⁵

Akerman herself was not unaware of this theory's applicability to her own case. In a 2011 interview with Elisabeth Lebovici, daughter of famed psychoanalyst Serge Lebovici (a colleague of Green's), she mentions that she finds Green's "dead mother" theory to be directly pertinent to her own psychic traumas.⁶ What Green's theory does not account for is the impact of the actual death of the mother on those suffering this syndrome. And while there are no doubt different responses, all varying in degree or intensity, it would seem that the burden of the double death (imaginary and actual) for some may, in a very real sense, simply be too much to bear. What becomes clear when looking closely at Akerman's work, especially the more explicitly autobiographical projects, both documentaries and installations, and even her interviews, is that she provides all of the tools required to engage with her emotional and psychic states, fairly prompting the viewer to do so.⁷

I am conscious of having joined the ranks here of film theorists who cross the line to psychoanalyze the filmmaker through her films. I would like to give some consideration to my own slippages here, even if I find myself in the company of many esteemed commentators on Akerman's work. If I am sliding between such registers, reading this last gift of a film perhaps rather too personally, I see it actually as an effect of her work (and not just this one film) as much as an overstep on my part. For Akerman's cinema invites a particular type of intimacy, luring spectator and critic alike into a relation that not only feels one-on-one, as if one has been directly addressed, but inclines one to want to embrace and contain her vulnerabilities. While a film theorist is trained to read and interpret the film and not the filmmaker, I believe that even the best-trained and most restrained film theorist can be forgiven for reading authorial intentionality and indeed psychic states into Akerman's work, despite the disciplinary constraints against it.

Akerman's vision is particular, and particularly personal. She is a guileless filmmaker who operates as if by instinct more than by design, never labored or studied despite great skill. Her films speak to the viewer, at least those patient enough to listen, as if in profound and intimate conversation with an old and cherished friend. It is part of why she is so beloved, and clearly the reason why those who loved her work are so bereft with her passing. It is as if a confidant, an interlocutor, a soul mate, has been lost. For it is her soul that she bares, in her fiction films and even more in her

documentary and installation work, and she did so with increasing frequency and poignancy as time went by. Her images always register a unique vision while her text, often performed in her own raspy voice, conveys aspects of her inner life almost as if she were confiding to an analyst. She communicates something of these interior thoughts, as when she says plainly, in *Là-bas*:

I don't feel like I belong. And that's without real pain, without pride. No, I'm just disconnected. From practically everything. I have a few anchors. And sometimes I let them go or they let me go and I drift. That's most of the time. Sometimes, I hang on. For a few days, minutes, seconds. Then I let go again.

In the installation that initiated her move into the gallery, *Bordering on Fiction: D'Est* (1995), Akerman elegantly and compellingly deconstructs her feature documentary *D'Est (From the East, 1993)* on 24 monitors. Yet it is the final monitor (screen 25), located in the inner sanctum of the installation, that initiates an encounter with something as close to the Real as ever glimpsed in the moving image.⁸ Over the abstracted images of lights and streets—indistinct exteriors—she speaks of her primal scene, the one that recurs in all her films without her knowing: the scene of evacuation, of people on the verge of extinction, driven by the force of history to be no longer at home anywhere, on the brink of disaster. "There is nothing to do," she says, "it is obsessive and I am obsessed." She says one doesn't realize until one finishes that one has, in essence, made the same film yet again, revisiting the same themes over and over.

These recurrent themes and tropes have the effect of an ongoing return, and none so much as the mother. While Akerman claims that the primal scene of exile is "far behind or always in front" of every image she makes, the exile is factually that of her Holocaust survivor mother, which Akerman seems to experience and represent as if it were her own. This appropriation of a memory not one's own can be seen as an instance of "post-memory" or, to go even further, borrowing liberally from some prescient observers of Akerman's unconscious workings (Bergstrom, Longfellow, and Mamula, in particular), as a complete and thoroughgoing slippage of object-subject relations, wherein there can be no subject, no articulated "I" on its own, no boundary between the "I" and the m/other.⁹

In Akerman's oeuvre, there are key scenes in which this slippage can be read most evidently. Early signs occur in *News from Home* (1976), where the daughter reads out loud the letters written to her by her mother. She addresses herself as "my darling daughter," ventriloquizing the mother's

words, even as the image track ensures an ironic distance from what is being said, indicating a distinct point of view. Nonetheless, it has been noted that their identities “conjoin” as highlighted in a recent program note for the film that asserts, “[w]ho is addressing whom is no simple matter.”¹⁰

However, it is in Akerman’s work from the 1990s that the fusion, or incorporation, becomes even more intractable. The allusions to her parents’ exile in *D’Est* (the film version) are evident just beneath the surface, making the retracing of the exilic march in reverse into a sort of embodied rehearsal that allows the filmmaker to make it her own. In the pair of explicitly autobiographical works, *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1996), made for French TV, and the little seen and rarely discussed installation *Selfportrait / Autobiography: a work in progress* (1998), first shown in New York at the Sean Kelly Gallery, the slippages of identity simply cannot be ignored.

Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman is an attempt at autobiography that substitutes the work for the life, or rather, allows the filmic work to speak of its creator’s life more efficiently and effectively than she could manage with words. Before the section of her re-edited work, entitled “autoportrait,” begins, Akerman delivers an extended address to camera. In it she presents the idea of her grandmother as artist, a rebellious proto-feminist painter of huge portraits of women, who was killed in Auschwitz and whose soul Akerman seems to imply she has inherited. The borderlessness of identity stretches back not one but two generations, as if, with her own large-scale filmic portraits of female characters, she is the actualization of ancestral dreams deferred. After the initial 15-minute disquisition, which is more about arriving at the form of her autobiography than it is autobiographical per se, Akerman proceeds to express her autobiography as a mash-up of scenes from her own films.

Midway, there is an extended scene from *Portrait d’une jeune fille de la fin des années à Bruxelles* (*Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels*, 1993) in which the young girl of the title (Circé Letham), playing hookie from school, forges several permission slips, all of which begin: “Please excuse my daughter Michelle [an obvious homonym for Chantal], she cannot come to school . . .” and each ends with a different excuse. In the first she is said to have a cold. In the second, her aunt is dead. In the third she knocks off her uncle, then her father, and in the last one, which based on the process of elimination would likely implicate the death of her mother, she kills herself off instead: “elle est mort” (“she is dead”).

Immediately after, she cuts to a scene from *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*, 1975) in which the fictional

mother, Jeanne Dielman (Delphine Seyrig), enters the kitchen and prepares to polish her son’s shoes. The mother lives to serve her child, if only by force of habit and repetition. The child, in the very next scene, is the 18-year-old Akerman, performing in her first film *Saute ma ville* (*Blow Up My Town*, 1968), exaggeratedly mimicking the gestures of the mother. Placed in this order, immediately after *Jeanne Dielman*, it plays more like an extension of the action, taken to its logical, or illogical, conclusion. The child is channeling the mother’s gestures and making them her own, externalizing with her actions the utter hysteria that is masked by the extremely controlled gestures of the mother.

The autoportrait moves on to a brief scene from *Tout une nuit* (1982) where a woman, played by Chantal’s actual mother, Nelly Akerman, smokes a cigarette outside of her house. Akerman, as many know, was a great and committed smoker to the end, celebrating the act at the center of her installation *Femme d’Anvers en Novembre* (2007) and featuring it in most of her films. As Nelly steals her solitary moment, her daughter (literally, as it is Chantal Akerman’s own voice here) attempts to call her back from her private oblivion with an insistent “maman . . . Maman” heard from offscreen. Placed at the center of this work, it operates as a punctum in this self-portrait: a momentary display of the dynamics in play in the “dead mother” scenario. Scenes from these disparate films, juxtaposed in this way, alter the syntax of her oeuvre, rewriting it in an effort to express not only the salient themes developed over (then) thirty years of prolific filmmaking, but to express something profound about Akerman’s own identifications and preoccupations, which begin and end with the mother.

The other work in this pair, *Selfportrait / Autobiography: a work in progress*, extends this practice of the films standing in as a legitimate form of self-representation. A six-monitor installation, it draws upon four of Akerman’s films (*D’Est*, *Jeanne Dielman*, *Tout une nuit*, and *Hotel Monterey* [1972]) again in a type of mash-up, revisiting scenes that are meant to suggest an autobiographical register, where one’s work stands in metonymically for oneself. Yet this time, instead of a lengthy preamble which refuses precisely that which it promises (i.e., an autobiographical narrative), there is a simultaneous audio track in which Akerman reads extracts from her first autobiographical book, *A Family in Brussels*.¹¹ The installation creates a kind of cat and mouse relay between the audio and the visual registers. When seated, one can hear the audio at the expense of properly seeing the imagery, as the monitors are placed on plinths. When standing, one can see the imagery without properly hearing the narration. Thus there is a tension between that which is spoken



A scene from *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années à Bruxelles* (1993) recut in *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1996).



Jeanne polishes her son's shoes in *Jeanne Dielman* (left), and Akerman anticipates this gesture in *Saute ma ville* (right).

and that which can be seen, forcing the visitor to choose one or the other at any given time. For those familiar with the extracts of the films presented, it is the novelty of the audio register that compels.

Akerman's first-person narration leads one to assume that she is speaking her own thoughts. Yet without signaling a shift, she seamlessly slides into her mother's perspective. The slippage goes back and forth, without the listener ever being certain whose thoughts are being vocalized at any given point. The narration that begins with the "I" of the daughter dissolves imperceptibly into the "I" of the mother, and at points back again. That Akerman wrote the autobiography largely in the mother's voice, taking on the mother's thoughts as her own, is intriguing enough. Performing it adds another layer of intimate identification, with the identifiable voice of the filmmaker speaking at once as herself and another. And calling it an autobiography and a self-portrait suggests a boundarilessness that the vocalized slippage enhances.¹² This slippage, in fact, goes a step beyond the mere ventriloquism

of the mother's words, as in the letters from *News from Home*, into a full-blown migration of the soul. This move is effected vertiginously through the voice, an uncanny projection of the self which is at once ineradicably associated with a source, emitted from a given body, and yet is without material existence of its own: floating in the air, as if in search of a home.

It has escaped no one that the maternal is a figure that recurs throughout Akerman's oeuvre. Brenda Longfellow proclaimed, back in 1989, that "if there is a phantasmatic core to the work of Chantal Akerman, it lies in the desire to reconstitute that image of the mother, the voice of the mother."¹³ If, as Tijana Mamula writes, in "virtually all her work" Akerman "keeps her mother very much alive," then *No Home Movie* appears to be an attempt to reconcile herself to the fact that her work could no longer do so.¹⁴ Empty and inert, the final shot of the mother's apartment stares out from the screen, ominously, like a memento mori, the matching ornamental urns taking on the appearance of two ossuaries. It suggests mutely what no one had considered,



And so it begins and ends with the mother: Nelly Akerman reads in her kitchen in *No Home Movie* (2015).

what no one would have dared to contemplate: what would happen when she could no longer keep her mother alive with her films? With Akerman, arguably, there is no film without the mother, and it is irrefutable, as evidenced from this lamentably irreversible end, that there would be no further filmmaking without her. The question of who was keeping whom alive with these films seems, in its aftermath, yet another twist in the skein of identity slippages that traverse the length and breadth of Akerman's oeuvre.

Author's Note

I would like to thank Ruth Novacek for help with French translation, as well as Başak Ertür and the editors of this dossier, Ivone Margulies and B. Ruby Rich, for their extremely helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

Notes

1. Esther Orner, "A Last Conversation with Chantal Akerman," *Senses of Cinema*, December 2015. See <http://sensesofcinema.com/2015/chantal-akerman/a-last-conversation-with-chantal-akerman/>. Orner was a close family friend of Akerman's.
2. I am intentionally paraphrasing a famous quote from an early interview in which Akerman describes her framing of Jeanne Dielman as keeping a respectful distance that allowed

the character to "live in the middle of the frame. I didn't go in too close, but I was not very far away. I let her be in her space." "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*: Excerpts from an interview with *Camera Obscura*, November 1976," *Camera Obscura* 2 (Autumn 1977): 119.

3. Janet Bergstrom, "Invented Memories," in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1999), 99.
4. *Ibid.*, 105 (italics in original).
5. "The Greening of Psychoanalysis: André Green in Dialogues with Gregorio Kohon," in *The Dead Mother: The Work of André Green*, ed. Gregorio Kohon (Routledge, London, 1999), 57.
6. "No Idolatry and Losing Everything that Made You a Slave," interview with Chantal Akerman by Elisabeth Lebovici, *Mousse Magazine* 31 (November 2011), <http://mousse-magazine.it/articolo.mm?id=763>
7. Though clearly all of her work can be seen, in some way, as autobiographical, Akerman herself says as much in a videotaped interview with Terrie Suleman, for the opening of the "Moving in Space and Time" retrospective of Akerman's work at the List Visual Art Center, MIT, Cambridge, MA, on May 1, 2008. She suggests that even her rhythms should be seen as autobiographical in that they derive from her way of seeing and being in the world. See <http://video.mit.edu/watch/chantal-akerman-moving-through-time-and-space-9370/>
8. The title *Bordering on Fiction: D'Est* refers to the three-chamber installation curated by Kathy Halbreich and first presented at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1995,

- whereas the title *D'Est* refers to the original film, released in 1993, upon which the installation was based and which was also included as part of the installation, in the first chamber.
9. See my earlier thoughts on this matter, in Alisa Lebow, "Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman's *D'Est*," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 1 (2003): 34–82. For more on Akerman's identification with the mother, see Brenda Longfellow, "Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13, nos. 1–2 (1989): 73–90, and Tijana Mamula, "Matricide, Indexicality and Abstraction in Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* and *Là-bas*," *Studies in French Cinema* 8, no. 3 (2008): 265–75.
 10. Program notes by A Nos Amours for ICA screening of *News from Home* on January 23, 2016, in London. See www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/nos-amours-chantal-akerman-4-news-home
 11. Chantal Akerman, *A Family in Brussels* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2003), originally published in French as *Une famille à Bruxelles* (L'Arche, 1998).
 12. One is reminded, for instance, of Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), yet where that title was meant to call attention to the paradox, Akerman's slippages remain unsignaled and are thus considerably more disturbing. I have written elsewhere about this slippage: Lebow "Memory Once Removed," 47. Amy Taubin, usually a very careful and precise critic, misremembered this aspect in her original review of the show for the *Village Voice*. She wrote that "[t]he text would be purely autobiographical except that the first-person narrator is not Akerman but her mother." Amy Taubin, *Village Voice*, May 12, 1998.
 13. Longfellow, "Love Letters to the Mother," 73.
 14. Mamula, "Matricide, Indexicality and Abstraction," 273.