



Figure 1. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Courtesy of Janus Films

Souvenirs de Chantal

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

Chantal Akerman and Georges Perec share an aesthetic and a practice that probe the depths of identity, exile, memory, and displacement in an “invocation of and simultaneous distancing from autobiographical indices, [reflecting] on the porous boundaries between lived experience and fiction.”¹ Perec had many affinities with Chantal, not the least of which was the generational memory of the Shoah. Perec, while eight years younger than Chantal’s mother, Natalia (Nelly), belonged to the first generation; Chantal belonged to the second. They shared an interest in formal experimentation around an inexpressible traumatic past, the continuous evolution of form in whatever medium they were working, and a protean, almost joyous engagement with language—cinematic or written, or both. Perec has been described as a novelist, a filmmaker, a documentarian, and an essayist. Reverse the first two terms, add “installation artist,” and you have a description of Chantal.

In the early seventies, Harry Mathews told Georges Perec about Joe Brainard’s small book *I Remember* (1970), in which the American artist and writer developed an intriguing form of autobiography.² Perec began his own *Je me souviens* (1978) but made it

more characteristically observational, a chronicle of the quotidian as well as a self-portrait, and he dedicated it to Brainard.³ After Perec died, Mathews began his own version of the familiar form, *The Orchard* (1988), “simply to avail [himself] of the written word in facing the dismay that at that moment was overwhelming so many of us.”⁴ My own contribution to this form is offered as a tribute to and appreciation of Chantal, a chronicle of our history, and an unusual glimpse into the highly productive career of one of our beloved pioneers. It is also a sort of memory work, which I hope through its scope will work on that porous border “between lived experience and fiction.”

I REMEMBER my first meeting with Chantal in 1977, in her tiny Paris apartment, at the beginning of her career, after she had returned from Berkeley. *Camera Obscura* had published one of the first discussions of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Belgium/France, 1975) in English, and Janet Bergstrom had organized an interview there. Connie Penley and I picked up the threads in Paris. This young, feisty, imaginative filmmaker gave me a poster for *Jeanne Dielman*, a realistic sketch of Jeanne and Sylvain waiting at the dinner table, and I had it framed. It became my muse for many years. It is worth a lot of money now.

I REMEMBER thinking, as a travel-weary Chantal opened a can of tuna and sat on the floor in 1977, how much, in retrospect, she reminded me of the weary Aurore Clément in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (France/Belgium/Germany, 1978) and how human and endearing, even welcoming, was this young woman, almost a celebrity already.

I REMEMBER Berkeley professor Bertrand Augst plying us with French articles and interviews about this astounding young woman filmmaker while we were preparing the inaugural issue of *Camera Obscura*. Quite an origin story.

I REMEMBER Martin Walsh, a brilliant film scholar who could write about semiotics for *Jump Cut*, telling me about a film that baffled him when he saw it in Edinburgh. Really baffled him. It was *Jeanne Dielman*.

I REMEMBER loving Sami Frey's film *Autour de Jeanne Dielman*, now included in the Criterion DVD, shot simultaneously with the feature and later edited by Chantal in 2004, which gave such good insight into Chantal's process while working with Delphine Seyrig in conversations about space and time. Not character.

I REMEMBER being struck by the number of times that a typewriter, laptop, or the act of writing itself appears in Chantal's films. And then there are the letters.

I REMEMBER that when I started teaching "Women and Film," I planned to screen *Jeanne Dielman* near the end of the term. My colleagues all told me that I was crazy to show that film to uncomprehending undergraduates. Decades later, upon learning of Chantal's death, many students wrote to me, grateful that they had first seen her film in my course.

I REMEMBER Gwen Foster sending FedEx to my door to collect my chapter for her edited collection on Akerman just as I finished the last sentence. "What's Beneath Her Smile?" is about the cinematic and feminist relations between Germaine Dulac's film *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (France, 1923) and Chantal's film about an unsmiling housewife.⁵

I REMEMBER having dinner in London in the late spring of 2017 with filmmaker Ruth Novacek and writer Cécile Chich at a restaurant that was Chantal's favorite. Therefore, her spirit also dined with us.

I REMEMBER this phrase of Harry Mathews: "I remember Georges Perec saying that buttered French bread [une tartine beurrée] was the most delectable food in the world. His usual breakfast consisted of a tartine and café au lait."⁶ I thought of Jeanne and the thermos of coffee.

I REMEMBER with delight that my favorite photo (which I made into a postcard) was of a tartine and a café au lait.

I REMEMBER seeing the bookstore window in Paris when the Gallimard edition of Perec came out. We wanted the display poster, because of the cats, but it was not for sale.

I REMEMBER reading that in 1988, when the Avignon Festival honored Georges Perec with readings and an exhibition, Sami Frey performed *I Remember* on stage as a monologue with a minimal set and a stationary bicycle as his only prop.

I REMEMBER Sami Frey's set of incredible connections binding Chantal (a lifelong friend), the Shoah, memories of the maternal, *Cléo from 5 to 7* (dir. Agnès Varda, France/Italy, 1962), *Bande à part* (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1964), Samuel Beckett, Georges Perec, and Marguerite Duras in a sacred play of associations. Duras has said that she based one of her Aurélia Steiner texts on Sami's experience: during the war, his mother left him with a neighbor when he was five years old. She had promised him she'd be back soon, but she never returned, having perished in the camps.

I REMEMBER thinking how handsome Sami Frey was when I saw a screening of Chantal's *Le Déménagement* (*Moving In*, France, 1993).

I REMEMBER seeing *News from Home* (France/Belgium, 1976) for the first time when to me, as a Californian, the glaucous images of the New York subway seemed both scary and enchanting. Nelly's letters to her daughter, read in Chantal's soothing monotone, provided a kind of comfort.

I REMEMBER *News from Home* at the Jewish Museum, my adorable, diminutive in-laws attending my talk and saying that they liked "that meshuggenah film" even though they couldn't understand it.

I REMEMBER critic Jonathan Rosenbaum telling me that Chantal's face lit up when he said the word *mishpocheh*.

I REMEMBER discovering, for the first time, that Chantal's Jewish identity was central to her work when I saw the installation *From the East: Bordering on Fiction* (1995) at the Jewish Museum in New York City. Twenty-four television screens showed portions of the film *D'Est* (*From the East*, France/Belgium, 1993) in the middle room while the first room screened the film in its entirety. The



Figure 2. *D'Est* (1993). Courtesy of Fondation Claire Atherton and Marian Goodman Gallery

third room held a twenty-fifth, black-and-white television monitor on which Chantal pronounced the commandment against idolatry, first in Hebrew and then in English. But more important was her voice-over:

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, there were, there will be, there are at this very moment, people whom history (which no longer even has a capital “H”), whom history has struck down. People who are waiting there, packed together, to be killed, beaten, or starved, or who walk without knowing where they are going, in groups or alone. There is nothing to do. It is obsessive, and I am obsessed. Despite the cello, despite cinema. The film finished, I say to myself, *that’s* what it was; once again, *that*.

I REMEMBER asking my husband, Joel, what his conversation with Chantal was about at the Jewish Museum’s installation of *D’Est*. “Being second generation,” he answered. In 1996, I hadn’t

really known how seriously the imprint of the Shoah had impacted Chantal's work.

I REMEMBER that I used the bit of money that I got for speaking at the Jewish Museum to buy Serge Klarsfeld's magisterial book *French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial*, which gives a name, place and date of birth, last address, and convoy to Auschwitz of all 11,403 Jewish children deported from France.⁷ There are pictures, too, for those that can be found. I was beginning to understand its crucial relation to Chantal's work, the book's explicitness working dialectically with Chantal's necessarily oblique and allusive reference to the Shoah in films and installations that bear its traces in less concrete terms.

I REMEMBER my high school friend Evy Kahan's French mother, a tiny woman with a haunted face and a number on her arm.

I REMEMBER that I wrote a poem for my father-in-law's funeral in which I reconfigured his Auschwitz number—141281—toward positive meanings in his life.

I REMEMBER being incredibly touched by the maternal kiss in Chantal's *Tomorrow We Move* (France/Belgium, 2004) and that I would later write that the film, in combination with her installation *Walking Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge* (2004), represented for me the heart of many of Akerman's projects. The memory of the Shoah, never explicitly represented—yet transmitted through matrilineal silence, suffering, and strength—lies beneath and beyond everything that bears Chantal's signature.

I REMEMBER first learning of *Walking Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge*, which was paired with an exhibition of Charlotte Salomon's work at the Jewish Museum in Berlin in 2007, from a talk given by Griselda Pollock at the Clark in Massachusetts. Both artists—Charlotte in painting and collage, Chantal in film, installation, and writing—"take confrontation with the past as a point of departure for their work," I jotted down. In fact, we do too.

I REMEMBER receiving Griselda Pollock's long-awaited book on Charlotte Salomon and finding that it opens with Israeli sculptor

Dani Karavan's contemplative memorial to Walter Benjamin at Portbou.⁸

I REMEMBER that Dani Karavan's environmental site sculpture contains my favorite Walter Benjamin quotation etched in glass: "It is more arduous to honor the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical reconstruction is devoted to the memory of the nameless."

I REMEMBER Chantal telling Nicole Brenez that the only thing that made her dying father feel better was her singing him songs in Yiddish. That reminded me of the time that my mother-in-law, Miriam, was in the hospital, and our rabbi brought his guitar to her bedside. The Yiddish songs made Miriam and Morty shine with delight.

I REMEMBER being stunned at Chantal's specificity about Nelly's Auschwitz experience, especially since *Tomorrow We Move* and *Walking Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge* are notable for the lack of such detail in their reference to her mother and grandmother's Holocaust suffering. I know, for example, that Chantal has said that all of her films are in some way about her mother and that Nelly's silence was often her motivation. But her clarity regarding the memory about which her mother never spoke has haunted me. Nelly was fifteen at the time (like Marceline Lorian), manufacturing battle supplies for Krupp (like my father-in-law).⁹ "My mother and her aunts were taken care of by an older woman who would save them a bit of bread so that they could stay alive. [During the death march] my mother didn't realize it, but her aunts supported her when she fainted, and they chewed her food for her so she could eat."¹⁰

I REMEMBER how impressed and moved I was by the phrase, "The Jewish tradition has no other history than its own memory," by Pierre Nora, quoted by Marion Schmid and by Janet Bergstrom in their analyses of *Histoires d'Amérique: Food, Family, and Philosophy* (France/Belgium, 1988).¹¹

I REMEMBER shlepping out from Hoboken to BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music] in Brooklyn to watch *Histoires d'Amérique*,

a film that I'd often read about but never seen. It was worth the shlep—a more beautiful orchestration of immigrant voices with fanciful Mitteleuropean cultural touches, Yiddish phrases, and floating constellations of the Manhattan skyline I could not imagine. Chantal says of this film, “The Jews. (In exile, as usual.)”¹² In concrete terms, the film remains elusive.

I REMEMBER reading with a sense of happy recognition that, while working on *Histoires d'Amérique*, Claire Atherton and Chantal stayed at cinematographer Ellen Kuras's apartment near the Holland Tunnel, where the noise of the trucks always bothered them. Happy because the Holland Tunnel is what connects Manhattan to Hoboken, and it had its place in Chantal's narrative.

I REMEMBER Joel telling me that he and Chantal also spoke about their early Jewish education at Hebrew day school—and my bewilderment that I had known next to nothing about either. Chantal has said, “To go to yeshiva means learning the art of questioning and negation, and this after millennia, after the Hebrew Bible. The Talmud means learning how to discuss, to call things into question, to develop your thoughts.”¹³

I REMEMBER thinking that the few breathtaking shots of the beach in Tel Aviv that Chantal disperses among the enclosure and voyeurism of *Là-bas* (*Down There*, Belgium/France, 2006) are some of the most beautiful images in the history of the cinema.

I REMEMBER the beautiful gold earrings, my favorites, that Miriam brought back from Israel. How did she know that they would look so good on me? I wonder why I never think of Chantal in earrings.

I REMEMBER my week in Israel, where I had been invited to be on a panel about *A Couch in New York* (France/Belgium/Germany, 1996). Jerusalem, Carmel Market, Beit Hatfutsot Museum—it changed my life. Being in places that have existed for thousands of years gave me a new perspective, something spiritual, and a sort of connection that I hadn't realized before.

I REMEMBER the cancellation of the panel on *A Couch in New York* in Tel Aviv after the previous night's typical Q and A debacle (owing to Chantal's characteristic hostility to audiences). Once it was reinstated, Chantal was still testy, but the atmosphere was calmed by the gracious and informed direction of Régine-Mihal Friedman of Tel Aviv University. Chantal had problems with the foray into commercialism that the film represented. People familiar with her films were disappointed by this straightforward narrative; conventional audiences avoided the film because Chantal's name evoked the avant-garde. Whether this fact or the location (Israel) led to her frustration is not clear, but the mercurial and unpredictable presence was pure Chantal.

I REMEMBER learning that Chantal was as horrified as I was to learn of the murder of James Byrd Jr., a black man, in Jasper, Texas, where he was dragged from the back of a truck down a country road by three white supremacists. Chantal made a film, *Sud* (*South*, France/Belgium, 1999); I made a collage, or, as I called it, a paper mosaic. Chantal extended her particular perception of human suffering beyond the specific trauma of her Jewish family to a wider understanding of social evil.

I REMEMBER thinking how exhausting and exuberant, how deadly serious and deadpan funny, the episodes in *Toute une nuit* (*All Night Long*, Belgium/France, 1982) were. A mad tango is funny; loneliness is not. And how beautiful was Natalia, who played a role in her daughter's episodic fiction film. Did she have a suitcase?

I REMEMBER telling my friend Marcelline that she hadn't missed much when she couldn't make it to *Maniac Shadows* (2012) at The Kitchen. How stupid of me. The more I learn about the installation, how Chantal used a Blackberry for some of it and how she read from *Ma mère rit* (*My Mother Laughs*, 2013), the more I understand how central it is to all of her work.¹⁴ It's all there—the intimate personal stories, the documentarian's gaze on the everyday, the weight of the unsaid, the reciprocal respect between author and audience. But then, a lot of Chantal's oeuvre requires multiple screenings and readings.

I REMEMBER my happy recognition of the fact that Charles Denner, who played opposite Delphine Seyrig in *Golden Eighties* (France/Belgium/Switzerland, 1986), also played the Jewish father in Claude Berri's autobiographical film, *The Two of Us* (France, 1967), about his experiences as a hidden child in occupied France. Chantal has referred to Berri as "a small Jew who came from leather and fur, like my father."¹⁵ Berri is the father of Thomas Langmann, another Chantal friend and actor (*Nuit et jour*, France/Belgium/Switzerland, 1991), who produced the commercially successful film *The Artist* (dir. Michel Hazanavicius, France/US/Belgium, 2011).

I REMEMBER noting with surprise that I actually knew all five of the writers for *Golden Eighties*: Chantal, of course; Jean Gruault, whom I had interviewed about Godard's *Les Carabiniers* (France/Italy, 1963); Henry Bean, from the Berkeley days, and his wife, Leora Barish, who wrote *Desperately Seeking Susan* (dir. Susan Seidelman, US, 1985); and Pascal Bonitzer, from the formative *Cahiers du cinéma* time. Such a lighthearted musical, so many high-powered voices.

I REMEMBER seeing Henry Bean at the Lincoln Center memorial and telling him how beautiful I thought his tribute to Chantal in the *Forward* was.¹⁶ He told me that he hoped to get through reading it without crying. He didn't.

I REMEMBER a cute picture from the seventies: Agnès Varda and Chantal in profile, face to face. Perec remembers that Varda was a photographer for Jean Vilar's Théâtre Nationale Populaire. Varda remembers and reappropriates these photos in a recent installation at the Avignon Festival. Chantal tells Nicole Brenez that Varda's *Le Bonheur* (*Happiness*, France, 1965) "is the most anti-romantic film there is." While Agnès does not agree, Chantal thinks it is very daring for its time. Chantal's assessment of Varda: "Agnès has an intelligence that's attuned to the world."¹⁷

I REMEMBER dipping in to *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste* numerous times, each random look a discovery.¹⁸ Chantal's many haircuts, reflections on her films (read over and over again),

the laughter, the seriousness, and the friends, people moving in and out of her (and my) life. Portrait, to be sure. But of whom?

I REMEMBER learning that Chantal loved Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (US, 1959): "The way he invites the viewer to feel what a black woman would feel."¹⁹ It made me glad that I had written an article on that film in which I tried to say the same thing.

I REMEMBER wishing that every Chantal Akerman film would be put on DVD for endless thoughts, conversations, and inspirations. Perhaps the new archive, formed by Chantal's sister, Sylviane, and Marilyn Watelet (Fondation Chantal Akerman), will provide that.²⁰

I REMEMBER finding a photo on Sylviane's Facebook page that made me smile. It was of the two sisters laughing unabashedly, an image close to my heart.

I REMEMBER thinking how the deserts of Arizona and Israel were so similar in Chantal's films (her concern with physical space and landscape eschewed the banality of identifying signs) and the apotheosis that was a sort of chaotic blurring in *NOW* (2015), her last installation, now in the permanent collection of the Jewish Museum, where five screens showing jumbled desert landscapes shot from a moving car are accompanied by a jarring, percussive soundtrack of brutal combat and other noises.

I REMEMBER noting that *I Don't Belong Anywhere: The Cinema of Chantal Akerman* (dir. Marianne Lambert, Belgium, 2015) contained—alongside clips from Chantal's films, discussions about editing between Chantal and Claire Atherton, commentaries by Gus Van Sant, Skype conversations with her mother, Natalia, images of abandoned artillery in the Negev dunes, and autobiographical musings—two iconic moments taken from two significant films: a small tree, sturdy in the fiercely blowing wind, from *No Home Movie* (Belgium/France, 2015), Chantal's last film and an homage to her dying mother; and a Chasidic tale about the sanctity of generational transmission of prayers, rituals, and stories from *Histoires d'Amérique*, which one could say is Chantal's film of Jewish identity about immigration, isolation, and Yiddish culture.

Both films provide a nexus of major Chantal thematics: mother, Shoah, memory, place, and identity.

I REMEMBER the last time I saw Chantal. It was after the screening of *Almayer's Folly* (France/Belgium, 2011) at the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens, in 2012. I was still processing my thoughts. This was to be her last fiction film, one in which she extended her explorations of contemplative space and expanded time, begun, you could say, with *Jeanne Dielman*. Of course I mentioned how much I loved *Jeanne Dielman*, to which she replied, "That was forty films ago. Why do people act as if it's the only thing I've made?"

I REMEMBER a very short trip to Paris in April 2018 specifically to see the performance piece *CHANTAL?* in which Sonia Wieder-Atherton played her cello while *Saute ma ville (Blow Up My Town)*, Belgium, 1968) was screened twice and Aurore Clément read from *A Family in Brussels*. This "dialogue between a movie, a cello, and a text," "structured around an absence," in Wieder-Atherton's words, evoked Akerman's oeuvre, and Chantal herself, with tenderness and love.

Notes

I dedicate this to my late mother-in-law, Miriam Lewis, a treasure of love and compassion. I wish to thank my twin sister, Sharon, for suggesting the original form of a memory chain, and Bertrand Augst for his continued inspiration. And of course my husband, Joel, whose contribution to this essay is evident throughout.

1. Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 77.
2. Joe Brainard, *I Remember* (New York: Angel Hair, 1970; New York: Granary, 2001).
3. Georges Perec, *I Remember*, trans. Philip Terry and David Bellos (Boston: Verba Mundi, 2014).
4. Harry Mathews, *The Orchard: A Remembrance of Georges Perec* (Flint, MI: Bamberger, 1988).

5. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "What's Beneath Her Smile? Subjectivity and Desire in Germaine Dulac's *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*," in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 27–40.
6. Mathews, *Orchard*, 10.
7. Serge Klarsfeld, *French Children of the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
8. Griselda Pollock, *Charlotte Salomon and the Theatre of Memory: Trauma, Representation, and Life Histories in Leben oder Theater, 1940–1942* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
9. Marceline Loridan, as a young survivor, appeared in Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (France, 1961). As a seventy-five-year-old filmmaker, after a career in documentary with her husband, Joris Ivens, she made her first fiction film, *The Birch-Tree Meadow* (France/Germany/Poland, 2003).
10. Nicole Brenez, "Chantal Akerman: The Pajama Interview," trans. David Phelps, *Lola*, no. 2 (2012), www.lolajournal.com/2/pajama.html. First published as *Chantal Akerman: The Pajama Interview* (Vienna: Viennale, 2011). Thanks to Adrian Martin for making this available to me.
11. Janet Bergstrom, "Invented Memories," in Foster, *Identity and Memory*, 111; Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, 88.
12. Brenez, "Pajama Interview."
13. Brenez, "Pajama Interview."
14. Chantal Akerman, *Ma mère rit* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2013). An English translation by Corina Copp is forthcoming for the Song Cave. A British edition will be translated by Daniella Shrier for Silver Press.
15. Brenez, "Pajama Interview."
16. Henry Bean, "Our Lives with (and without) Chantal Akerman," *Forward*, 10 October 2015, forward.com/culture/322320/our-lives-with-and-without-chantal-akerman/. The Lincoln Center Memorial can be viewed online at vimeo.com/162304275.

17. Brenez, "Pajama Interview."
18. Chantal Akerman, *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2004).
19. Brenez, "Pajama Interview."
20. See the website-in-progress of Fondation Chantal Akerman, in collaboration with Cinematek, at www.chantalakerman.foundation/.

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis is the author of *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (1990; expanded edition, 1996) and coauthor of *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (1992). Her background in feminist film theory is largely due to her doctoral work in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned her PhD in 1984. As one of the four founding coeditors of *Camera Obscura*, she helped formulate the aims and focus of this first journal of feminism and film theory. The journal's inaugural issue in 1976 was one of the first English-language publications to discuss Chantal Akerman's pioneering film *Jeanne Dielman*. Her work on the Shoah in France, *Essays on Childhood, the Family, and Anti-Semitism in Occupied France* (forthcoming) treats material culture and daily life before, during, and after World War II. She teaches courses in film through the English and comparative literature departments at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey.



Figure 3. Natalia Akerman at home, mid-1970s.
Courtesy of Jane Stein