ELEMENTAL AKERMAN: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE NO HOME MOVIE

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"And, as one says, the red thread of this film is a character, a woman born in Poland, who arrives in Belgium in 1938 to flee the pogroms and the horror. This woman is my mother."

It does not matter from where the wind blows so fiercely in the opening scene of Chantal Akerman’s final film No Home Movie (2015). What matters is its elemental force against a resilient tree in a desert. This raw, exposed tree and its unnerving sound stand in stark contrast to, and radically reframe the protected domain of, an apartment that belongs to Chantal’s mother, Natalia Leibel Akerman.

The film is taken up mainly with the interior of a spacious bourgeois apartment and three strongly felt presences—Natalia, Chantal, and a camera. Elegant, Natalia slowly crosses the living room or the kitchen in a film punctuated by hallways and anxiously reassuring conversations. The mother sits at the kitchen table, the daughter cooks and serves her meals, and they seem to mother each other; other scenes, with a couple of the mother’s helpers and Sylviane, Chantal’s sister, suggest particular care for Chantal too.

When, almost an hour into No Home Movie, a sequence of unplaced desert landscapes cuts into the shielded apartment interiors, the film’s opening shot of a wind-buffeted tree retroactively assumes the status of a prologue for an alternate narrative. Images of windy, random patches of road, hills, and deserts, filmed mostly from a moving car and often rendered as quite
abstract, thrust an unexplained urgency into what had been an intimate record.

Much like the tree (filmed with a BlackBerry outside of a hotel window), the desert landscapes in No Home Movie convey most literally the here and now of the peripatetic filmmaker, who will film at home and elsewhere. That the daughter is one who comes and goes is clear from two extended Skype conversations that are obviously typical of a mother-and-daughter routine. They have a hard time separating in a loving flurry of repeated goodbyes.

These Skype conversations charged with affect enunciate what the film is about. When Natalia asks why she is filming, Chantal explains she wants to do something to show there is no distance in the world. At the core of this film meditation on final partings, a hyper-mediated beacon pulses…

...a sense of distance between herself and her mother. This dynamic is not reducible to a simple opposition between staying or leaving. The affective map managed by Chantal Akerman, the person and the artist, had always involved a tension between abstract evocation and concrete dailyness, between charged silences and deeply felt and expressed emotions. Thus the film’s emotional immediacy has to be understood alongside the filmmaker’s characteristic indirection, the kitchen talks along with the desert shots.

Kitchen Talks

In her long autobiographical essay “Le frigidaire est vide. On peut le remplir” (“The Fridge Is Empty. Let’s Fill It Up”) Akerman talked about how she channeled her mother’s silence about the camps into her art. It is a kitchen scene from D’Est (From the East, 1993) that sparks these associations.

At a kitchen in Moscow [a woman drinks] ... a cup of tea with a funny little smile while listening to the music. She would also have things to tell, but I’d rather not [ask] ... probably she would have answered as my mother did. “I’d do whatever, Chantal, but don’t beg me to tell stories, I’d go mad.” I didn’t want to push it any further so I didn’t. So I took over and began to obsess. Silently, or singing, or laughing ... as in my first film ... It’s not me but my image or something of the sort that goes mad while waiting. But waiting for what? I could have stopped there. I sing, I dance I eat something of the sort that goes mad while waiting. But no, cinema had already hooked me. Both like a freedom and a sort of slavery.

This ruminative text ties content, form, and process to images of implosion and explosion. The “both” that gives psychological depth to her obsession with making films also animates her aesthetics in a fertile oscillation between drama and banality, between minor expressions and broader historical currents. Her personal story accounts for the root of D’Est’s layered silence; it also explains both the explosive despair that leads her Saute ma ville (Blow Up My Town, 1968) character from silence to song to blowing herself up and the filmmaker’s pressing need for cinematic expression.

As is clear from Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels, 1975), the first object to test the filmmaker’s creative autonomy was the protected albeit suffocating space of the mother’s house and its silences. It was in her parents’ kitchen that Akerman filmed Saute ma ville, and throughout her work it is in a room apart, but adjacent to her mother’s space,
that the filmmaker and her characters performed rituals of order and disorder, as if carrying out a continuous aesthetic experiment. At times, as in *Demain on déménage* (Tomorrow We Move, 2004), the need to separate from the mother is the explicit theme of the film; at others, as in *Je tu il elle* (1974), the distinctions between closing oneself off and creating are purposefully tangled. “And I left,” states Akerman in the opening of the film, proclaiming the creative escape that is possible for the artist even as they move inside a room.

Akerman dealt with explicit autobiographical material by de-dramatizing it or by distributing such references onto separate tracks, visual and aural, temporal and spatial. The disjunction and designed obliviousness between the realities of the mother’s letters and the New York locations that stand for a present from which the filmmaker daughter “speaks” in *News from Home* (1977) have made it one of Akerman’s strongest articulations of a bipartite structure that conveys, without simplifying, the tangle of closeness and distance between mother and daughter that runs through her work.

Two of her earlier small-scale films come even closer to illuminating what Akerman might intend by the directness and indirection, implosion and explosion, deployed in *No Home Movie*. One is *Là-bas (Down There)*, (2006), a film whose explicit subject matter is a problematic reference to home and to Israel, which is in fact the occluded referent of *No Home Movie*’s mysterious desert images. The other is *Aujourd’hui, dis-moi (Tell Me, 1980)*, a film on Jewish grandmothers, where Akerman’s identity as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor is for the first time presented.

Here as well, another utterly simple and oblique setup is devised to channel autobiographical revelation. Akerman is shown visiting with three older Jewish ladies to talk about their mothers who had died in the Holocaust, but the film starts with Chantal’s offscreen conversation with Natalia about her mother who died in Auschwitz and Natalia’s grandmother who raised her when she returned an orphan from the camps. Exiling her personal story to intermittent bits of the soundtrack, Akerman replicated one of her typical strategies in binding the personal to the collective, in articulating her story through that of others.

Under the pretext of a generation-based testimonial, the film accumulates multiple registers of the personal, including the peculiar enactment of a compliant, surrogate granddaughter’s visit. The last and longest visit hints at the manner in which the filmmaker’s full and attentive presence in the room, both as interviewer and listener, is as relevant to the film’s power as the indirect, offscreen allusions to Akerman’s history. Dressed up for the occasion in a red cardigan, an older lady adamantly promises to tell more stories but only if Chantal eats. Her stories reach into the shtetl, into descriptions of her grandmother’s legendary beauty and her mother’s gayness and ability to sew. When Akerman asks, she sings three Yiddish songs. In the separately filmed counter-shots, Akerman complies with her side of the bargain, slowly eating from a daunting tray of cakes. In this succinct version of the basic pretext of the film, survival via food and memory, the older woman adopts Chantal as a granddaughter for a day, pleading for one more meal, a dinner, during which the exhausted filmmaker falls asleep on camera, as both eat side by side facing an offscreen TV.

Critic Adam Roberts pinpointed the stakes of this feeding rite, noting that “Chantal is taking communion on what is left of the Jewish table.”

Indeed, from this film on, Akerman became increasingly aware of how her personal history as a second-generation Holocaust survivor threads through and drives all of her work. Starting with *D’Est*, a felt analogy with Jewish history, never explicit in the work, animates the filmmaker’s protracted interest in terrains of displacement, fraught histories of exile and racial discrimination. In *Sud (South)* (1999) and *De l’autre côté (From the Other Side)*, (2002), her subjects talk and she listens. As in *Dis-moi*, long pauses and silences push the viewers into sustained negotiations of their own associations and projections.

*No Home Movie* presents the primal script of the autobiographical litany that had become increasingly explicit in the artist’s statements and filmed self-portraits. It also foregrounds Chantal’s intense identification with her mother. The film’s conversations in particular are strikingly elemental, providing another register by which to grasp the artist’s transmutation of personal life into her films’ overlong and redundant dialogues. Here, in her last film, we actually hear the impossibly stretched and repeated goodbyes and terms of endearment that so elegantly hang over *News from Home*. At the kitchen table, Chantal spouts clichés to her mother as if to a child: “meat is protein, it builds muscles . . . the potato skin has vitamins.” She mouths Hebrew blessings with her mother to test her memory.

And they trade long-repeated family anecdotes: how her father stopped observing the shabbat once the grandfather died; how fooled we were by staying in Belgium in 1938; how pretty she was; how proud she was pushing the carriage; how proud she was holding her beautiful mother’s hand going home from school. I refrain from distinguishing between Natalia and Chantal here because this symbiotic conflation, so apparent in this film, had itself already become part of
Akerman’s art, most flagrantly in her novel Une famille à Bruxelles (A Family in Brussels, 1998).

That such simple exchanges happen within this apartment, the locus of all of Akerman’s ruminative thoughts, confirms this film’s astonishing accomplishment: to return to the source of one’s art, to maintain its everyday integrity, and to shape still yet another perfect film.

In Perspective, the Desert

Akerman completed No Home Movie, along with the two installations, De la Mèr(e) au desert (From the sea/mother to the desert) and Now, during the eighteen months between her mother’s death and her own in October 2015.11 Akerman had been about to leave for the Israeli desert when her mother died in April 2014. When she came back with the desert footage, she asked her editor, Claire Atherton, to organize also the images she had shot of her mother. More than forty-hours of footage, collated from various sources—phones, SD cards, computer, and her digital camera—were edited down to six hours. Unlike all of her previous work, the editing process did not start sequentially from a first shot.12 Instead Akerman and Atherton immersed themselves in the material, quite simply, in Atherton’s words, “being around her mother.”13 The footage had not been shot with a finished film in mind, but Akerman handed the materials over to Atherton, saying simply, “we may be able to do something with it.” Their simultaneous process of making Now and No Home Movie is instructive about the significance of the mysterious exteriors intercutting the familial interiors in No Home Movie.

In Now, the desert footage seen in No Home Movie as well as its jarring sounds of wind gain topical urgency through additional landscape images as well as a cacophony of juddering sounds, explosions, ululations, sirens, and animal cries. In its installation design, five screens project hurtling desert views: bluffs of red rocks, crumbling stone walls, and different horizons stream by in distinct speeds and color. As one moves toward the middle fifth screen, digital static shoots down, amplifying the emotional and sensorial chaos.

Now was meant to combine the “infinitely small and the enormously large” and No Home Movie likewise balances these extremes with great sensitivity. Living within the filmmaker’s same “hard drive,” these two sets of images—one ambitiously geared to the expression of explosive world conflicts, the other focused on daily routines shared by daughter and mother—confirm how much of the artist’s psychic and artistic economy depended on a push-pull dynamic between the mother and the world.14

Open to multiple readings, No Home Movie’s title speaks of exile, the existential Jewish condition that propelled
Akerman’s wandering as well as her characters’ refusals of traditional grounding. It also defiantly declares the film’s significance as more than a record of family gatherings. If filming was Chantal’s way of keeping her aging mother company, the completion of the film meant working through that gaping absence without her.

In fact, the passage from the immersive watching of the footage of a loved one to the actual shaping of this footage into the final film was possible only once Akerman decided to plant the resilient tree at the film’s start. Such a chronology of editing significantly confirms that in No Home Movie the problematic of autonomy and fusion running throughout Akerman’s oeuvre is also signaled through an inscription of alterity, in this case the sequence of expressive exterior shots that crisscross the film, giving it a backbone. Beginning with the shot of a battered tree, these images of a barren outdoors are the counterpoint without which the film might have never existed except as an amorphous home movie, a soothing filmic hearth.

The desert images interrupting the film are of three kinds. The first lengthy sequence is of a landscape that changes with the car’s movement: at times an embankment of crumbling rocks close to the road, at other times receding barren hills, all rushing by noisily. The second sequence is more turbulent and blurry as if it lacked spatial coordinates; a kinetic boulder takes over the screen, much like Michael Snow’s La Région centrale (1971) with its visceral energy that once had so fascinated Akerman. The third sequence, made up of fixed and calmer landscape shots, appears in between the last shot shared by Chantal and her mother, and the one of Chantal exiting the apartment.

Despite Akerman’s statements to the contrary and the filmmaker’s purposeful lack of geographical identification, it is not irrelevant that Israel is the source of the desert images and that, in spite of its ostensible abstraction, the referent of Now’s explosive chaos is the Middle East. For a long time Akerman had “played with the idea of making a rather erratic film about the Middle East,” following the same open approach she had used with D’Est. She speculated on the potential differences between the two films and whether, unlike D’Est, the Middle East film could generate a real encounter with another, without necessarily sparking associations with Akerman’s Jewish-history imaginary. She admitted that it could indeed be different, and not only for its unique images and sounds: “the heat and the cold, the light and the shadows . . . wind and sands, the cacophony of cities and the almost mortal silence of villages in the afternoon, the night that falls from one moment to the next, while the green neon of the minarets are lit and then also the light breeze coming from within the earth.” But, she acknowledged, the difference was also due to the associations of fear the project raised: “because suddenly and confusedly—in a significant disorder—you hear the burning words of Palestine, Jerusalem, FIS, Hamas, veil, fundamentalism, immigration, democracy, xenophobia, suburbs, violence, rapport with the other, identity, exile, and underscoring it all the word ‘foreigner’ with its consort of adjectives.”

Already in 1997 she had thought it was “high time” that she make the Middle East film, and almost two decades later she exacerbated this urgency by taking on the world chaos and reshaping it into her installation, a Now of “significant disorder.” Similarly, and through their very abstraction, the desert images in both film and installation indicate the difficult geopolitical associations of that specific terrain for a secular Jew. In her Middle East film proposal, Akerman had made veiled allusions to her problematic relation to Israel and she used the notion of the desert to stand both for her allegiance to Judaism (she shows her knowledge of Jewish monotheism by rehearsing some key Bible sayings) and her Diasporic non-nationalistic aspiration.

I’d like to film over there but only, however, to shoot the desert that plays along the “though [sic] shall not make graven images that look like” and that welcomes my pious wishes of nomadism and also the idea that the land you own is always a sign of blood and barbarism and that the land you cross and do not conquer makes you think about the book. ([Maurice] Blanchot expressed it so well, but it’s easier said than lived and you ought at times to settle somewhere. And when you settle, it gets even harder). In this formulation the desert becomes an acceptable substitute for the Jewish abstract conception of God, as well as of a nomadic condition, an unplaceable place. La-bas expressly addresses this sense of unbelonging. Closest to No Home Movie in many ways, the film was shot in Israel, also...
with Akerman’s own digital camera. The option for a low-resolution and simpler mode of production only enhances the two films’ shared cloistered and diary-like qualities. Intimate filmmaking was Akerman’s deepest way of confronting belonging and uprootedness.

In *Là-bas* the filmmaker deploys cinema as armor and retreat. She hides behind the shades of a Tel Aviv apartment, filming little vignettes of everyday life out of her blocked window views with a few excursion shots to the beach. She voices her hesitancy in an unsteady ruminative flow that reiterates and modulates her ambivalence toward the outside (present-day Israel). Windows, the balcony door, the neighboring buildings, as well as the bamboo shades, compose a space of internal frames. It is in contrast with these hyperframed interiors that the film suddenly jolts the viewer with a shaky image of a plane in the sky. Jaggedly edited out of fragments, it connotes at once threat (there had been a terrorist attack that week) and exhilaration: finally, after all, Akerman films outside.

Two of her earlier films had displayed a similar counterpoint between claustrophobic interiors and the outside. Only in the last shots of New York in *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and of Brussels in *Les années 80* (The Eighties, 1983) does the camera move toward a terrace for a series of 360-degree pans of the cities’ skylines. These encircling shots bring a breath of fresh air into these films even as they shape a virtual enclosure.

In *Les années 80* this open-air encirclement also becomes the occasion for the film’s spoken credits, in which the pronouncing of the traditional Jewish toast “Next year in Jerusalem” suggests how Israel has acquired a symbolic value in balancing the filmmaker’s filial rites with her artistic boldness.

And so it is with *No Home Movie*’s alternation between interiors and exteriors. With their inchoate abstractive force, the desert images conjoin the liberating energy that Akerman associated with the American avant-garde to an inhospitable world that needs to be confronted head on. Just as poignantly, the film’s sequence of subjective and abstract shots fixes upon a private sign of loss, an overturned blue garden chair, and aligns it with an overwhelming sense of the world’s chaos: from dust to dust.

### The Blue Chair and the Red Thread

In addition to the desert landscapes, *No Home Movie* features other potent images that hint at a more private turbulence—the battered tree and a blue lounge chair, overturned in a backyard garden, “because of the wind that sweeps everything in its path,” as Akerman says, describing her mother’s view from her apartment terrace on a desolate December day in *Ma mère rit* (My Mother Laughs, 2013).

Pointedly, the broken chair appears in *No Home Movie* a number of times. It is the third image in the film, following that of a shirtless sunburned man sitting on a park bench. This quieter image, called the “green shot” by Akerman, serves as a buffer between the unexplained violence of the windswept tree and that of the chair, an image of wreckage closer to home.

And then thrice more the blue canvas chair mysteriously draws the camera—and the viewer along with it—toward the terrace. This intent to look outside, performed through a subjective camera, punctures the objective depictions of the apartment and its routines, hinting at pressing inner motives.

Subjective or abstract shots are rare in Akerman’s sharp hyperrealist aesthetics and this interwoven sequence is not as explicit as the home movie scenes it intercepts. It is therefore essential to account for these choices. Given the centrality of the film’s mourning rite of watching and “being with” the mother’s footage, these discordant images of the desert or the backyard garden, so dissimilar in their abstract expressivity or subjective impulse, are an alternate strand, the alternative...
to that indisputable red thread that winds its way in and out of the home movie footage: the figure of the mother.

The finished film is perfectly balanced through its halting moves between empty shots and the eventual passage of Natalia through the rooms. An array of compositions shift between showing the mother somewhat lost in the ample salon spaces or emerging through densely framed areas. The alternation between full visibility, partially obstructed views, and offscreen sounds creates an oblique association between out-of-sight presences and outright absences, between everyday contingencies and an increasingly disturbing uncertainty as to whether there is still someone in the apartment. The link between the two women can also be construed from the apartment’s depth and the lens’s reach. Akerman’s compositions are so assertive that the significance of the film is particularly magnified whenever Chantal or her mother (in a pink and lilac sweater) brushes past the camera, literally traversing the room’s depth and thus drawing, in separate shots, matching lines of distance and closeness.

It is when Natalia passes by the camera that the viewer notices how Akerman conceived of her mother as a thread winding through the camera’s eye. One lengthy shot in particular suggests this idea. Fixed, it focuses the sightline on the living room, seen as a thin slit symmetrically flanked by the furniture and doorframe. It is just possible to make out parts of Natalia and of Chantal, who passes behind her and out of sight. Five times Natalia walks to and from the living room and kitchen, blocking the camera with a mass of pink and lilac as her truncated body squeezes by. Even after she moves past, her presence is still felt in the empty shot through her muttering and shuffling. Each time she blocks the light, the camera self-corrects its white balance in an additional nod to the film’s hyper-sensitivity to this woman’s presence.

Akerman’s use of perspective as well as the camera’s lighting adjustments bring the film toward its inevitable dénouement. For these mundane comings and goings gain a different resonance once it is the daughter who crosses the entire salon’s depth and then moves back toward the camera to exit the frame. In the first and only silhouetted shot of the living room, it is barely possible to make out the figure of Sylviane watching TV on the sofa and Natalia lying down on her recliner. Earlier, both daughters had tried to keep their somnolent mother awake after lunch, pleading with her to tell stories. Sylviane had mentioned Chantal’s upcoming departure as a reason to stay awake—to stay alive, one suspects. Now, in this dark shot, the moment of Chantal’s departure has come and as she passes by the camera, she stops midway to kiss her mother on the crown of her head. “I want to see you every day.” Chantal promises they’ll talk on Skype every day and that she’ll be back in a month. As she moves further toward the overexposed terrace, her mother can be heard saying: “We’re even closer now.” And then—“Chantal, where is she?”

Akerman seems to respond with one of her most abstract images, an overexposed handheld shot that gestures toward the outside and is blinded by the terrace light. This “answer” comes, of course, after her exit from the darkened salon, after her parting from her mother, after the last shot the two share together. This wild, erratic, and overly lit shot ending in an anxious white is followed by two fixed and quieter long takes of the desert, followed by a long peaceful verdant landscape. Next Chantal is seen in her room, all too neat, tying her shoelaces. She pulls the curtains and exits toward the camera one last time. The shot lingers in this penumbra, registering first sounds and then silence. The film then cuts to a shot of the hallway symmetrically separating the view of an open door that leads to a room, and another door open to the kitchen.
This time, in a marked departure from all prior shots, and despite casual street sounds and the passing shadow of a movement reflected on a vase, there is no question: the apartment is empty.

**Author’s Note**

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**Notes**

1. These are words taken from Chantal Akerman’s notes, as cited in Claire Atherton’s tribute at the French Cinematheque before the premiere of *No Home Movie* on November 16, 2015. See http://sensesofcinema.com/2015/chantal-akerman/chantal-akerman-claire-atherston/

2. Throughout this text, “Chantal” denotes the filmmaker’s personal relations as well as her presence within the shot, while “Akerman” denotes the film’s controlling agency.


10. *Sud (South)* focused on a recent lynching case in Jasper Texas; *De l’autre côté* (From the Other Side), on the perilous crossing of Mexicans to the United States.

11. Before its premiere at the Locarno Film Festival, *No Home Movie* was shown as a work in progress at the opening of *“De la mère au desert,”* alongside a reading of *Ma mère vit* in Mamuta Center in Jerusalem on July 15, 2014. *Now* premiered at the Venice Biennale, June 2015.


13. I want to thank Claire Atherton, Akerman’s editor since *D’Est*, for essential clarification on Akerman’s process in making the film, including her state of calm and happiness in making it.

14. Atherton mentioned that Akerman had told her “she wanted to make an installation with shots of the desert and sounds that announced the war. . . . a few weeks later [they] started sculpting the material . . . at the same time [they] found in Chantal’s computer images of her mother she had forgotten. And there, a film emerged conjoining these two matters: the moments spent with the mother and moments far away. Nothing was conceptualized, all was there, one needed only to be attentive.” Atherton, *“Elle faisait confiance à la vie,”* 91. Many have written about Akerman’s relation to her mother. One of the earliest was 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. For an extended analysis of this dynamic, see Mateus Araujo’s essay in this issue.

15. This detail was clarified for me by Claire Atherton, her editor; personal communication, March 29, 2016.

16. In an interview with Marsha Kinder, Akerman stated that the films of Snow and Mekas opened her mind to the “relation of film with one’s body.” See Kinder, “Reflections on Jeanne Dielman,” in *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (summer 1977): 2.


18. Ibid., 145.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 146.


22. In “*Là bas ou ailleurs*” Akerman seems to acknowledge the image has multiple connotations. She explains that the plane image was initially a nightmare or phantasmatical image, in short, a scene of panic: “As soon as I see a plane, I say ‘Here it is, there has been a terrorist attack and there will be war.’ But it is true that the scene says something else. . . . I filmed it without any technique and one day watching these images Atherton showed them in fast-forward. And that produced a strong effect, and an effect of contrast, no doubt.” (*Là bas ou ailleurs*, n.p.).

23. See Jacques Polet, “*La problematicque de l’enfermement dans l’univers filmique de Chantal Akerman,*” in *Chantal Akerman,*

24. Akerman, “she does not go out. Only to the terrace and that’s it. She looks at the desolate backyard garden, she looks at the cat, she looks at the dog. She sees the lawn chair which was overturned because of the wind that sweeps everything in its path.” Ma mère rit (Paris: Mercure de France, 2013), 13.

25. Atherton has mentioned how she and Akerman loved to name shots, naming for instance a long take of people crossing the snow in D’Est, “le superbe”—the arrogant. “What she saw in the “green shot” was the calm released by the scene.” Atherton, “Elle faisait confiance à la vie,” 90.