

Jon Davies on Chantal Akerman

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Chantal Akerman took her own life two years ago at the age of 65 after decades of suffering from manic-depression. Her mother Nelly, a Polish Jew who had come to Belgium in the 1930s before being sent to and surviving Auschwitz, died just one year before her daughter. The two were excruciatingly close, as those of you who have seen Akerman's final film, *No Home Movie*, have witnessed. To my mind, Akerman's body of work, which spans almost fifty years, embodies what cinema can do as an ethical and emotional medium. What is so achingly moving in her films is Akerman's sensitivity to how cinema and specifically the film frame can both confine and liberate. The way she wielded her camera illuminated the toll histories, borders, routines, and bodies can take, and how one may find moments of escape.

For Akerman, cinema was a means of creating a self beyond identity categories like woman, lesbian and Jew, and in excess of generational legacies, which in her case included both an inspiring matrilineage of strong women as well as the horrors of the Holocaust (which her mother adamantly refused to speak about). Akerman's first escape was going to the cinema, her chosen family that of iconoclastic European filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard. Her second escape was leaving Belgium for New York in 1971, a city where she could reimagine herself as many had before her. This distance between Europe and America, mother and

daughter, is the subject of *News from Home*. Here her mother's letters, mundane in content but potent in affect, are recited over her detached observational shots of Manhattan streets and subways. Akerman the daughter ventriloquizes her mother's voice, taking it into her body, even as the words are usually overwhelmed by the din of traffic. Film scholar, painter and Berkeley alumna Ara Osterweil's intensely personal article "[Between Her Body and the Stain](#)" considers Akerman's identity as daughter, suggesting that in *News from Home* intimacy "flourish[es] in the ellipses of what cannot be expressed." For we do not see either Akerman or her mother here, nor do we learn very many facts about them; the film's emotional power lies in the gaps and ambiguities. (Osterweil beautifully describes the letters as "exhausted documents that say nothing and everything about what it means to love someone.") We should recall that Akerman's trans-Atlantic journey – a distance reiterated in the voyage of every letter from mother to daughter – echoes at a historical remove those of the great Jewish émigré directors who fled Nazism to make films in Hollywood such as Fritz Lang and Billy Wilder. (And you'll see the beautiful closing long take of the film is shot on a ferry departing lower Manhattan, as if tracing the immigrant's journey in reverse). Wherever she traveled in the world, Akerman claimed that she sought to traverse the landscape similarly to how one reads a book, looking closely, deeply engaged, rather than with the possessing eye of a conquerer. From a minimalism that scholar Ivone Margulies approvingly called "Nothing Happens," Akerman's alchemy generated a visual field where "everything matters."

New York was incredibly formative for Akerman, an adopted motherland where, as Osterweil claims, her anonymity could be liberating. She writes, “anonymity and intimacy are not opposites, but the strange bedfellows of exile.” Akerman’s films give us a visceral sense of what it means to find or to fashion oneself through experiences of alienation and difference. This is an alternative, more fragile idea of “home” that recognizes the psychic weight of the far-flung migrations and the displacement that characterize our era. In New York, Babette Mangolte – the filmmaker and cinematographer who shot many of Akerman’s films, including those showing tonight – introduced her to the thriving avant-garde scene. Akerman found freedom in structural film, the 1970s movement christened by P. Adams Sitney and identified with Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton, cerebral men who were engaged in a rigorous examination of film’s essential formal elements. (While not lacking in wit, their films tended to valorize [“Reason Over Passion.”](#) However, in films like Snow’s epic *La Région Centrale*, where a specially-mounted camera moves freely for three hours in an otherworldly northern landscape, Akerman discovered the potential for an “I” to be unbound from the limitations of the body, and perhaps even from the traumatic history inherited from her mother. She and Mangolte watched it over and over again. What is so devastating about Akerman’s films is how often this promise is betrayed, how the mechanical camera eye can never truly pull us out of the world’s horrors.

Akerman claimed, “I learned from [Snow] that a camera movement... could trigger an emotional response as strong as from any narrative.” The meticulous

geometries of her tracking shots thus only seem to make the pain sharper, for example as she methodically documents lines of people perpetually waiting for buses or trains in *d'Est (From the East)*, or to cross the Mexico–US border in *De l'autre côté (From the Other Side)*. Or think of her film *Là-bas (Over there)*, where her anxiety prevents her from leaving a flat in Israel, her isolation only accentuated by filming out the window. (She confesses here, “basically I don’t know how to live, or go anywhere.”) Akerman was equally compelled by the long distances traversed in the experience of exile, and the claustrophobia of staying put and shutting oneself in. Both films tonight use the camera to trace the thin line between the comfort and confinement of home, whether it be the microscopic interiority of her one-room New York apartment in *La Chambre (The Room)*, a self-portrait, feminist homage to Snow’s 1967 film *Standard Time*, or in the macroscopic vastness of Manhattan’s urban grid and the potential for self-creation it represents in *News from Home*. And I think it remains very much an open question what exactly “feeling at home” meant to Akerman – I think it was something she could only experience through cinema. For a self perpetually caught between what is inherited and what can be imagined in a world tumultuously in flux, the camera provided her with a momentary anchor.

Jon Davies