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Marion Schmid and Emma Wilson, eds., *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives*. Cambridge: Legenda/Modern Humanities Research Association, 2019. 184 pp. £75.00 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-781886-39-7; (pb). ISBN: 978-1-781886-40-3; (eb). ISBN: 978-1-781886-41-0.

Review by Ivone Margulies, Hunter College.

Inspiring for artists and critics alike, Akerman's work feels surprisingly close. As Nicholas Elliott states in his tribute to the artist, Akerman "redefined the intimate"[1]; and in many ways, we continue to critically grapple with an art that so delicately balances clarity, directness, and intriguing singularity. Akerman's incisive interventions have redefined issues of duration, of women's self-inscription, of performance. And beyond the oft-repeated lines about the blurring of autobiography and fiction, it is Akerman's restless move among genres and modes, as well as her allusions to her mother, the Holocaust, and exile, that keep us revisiting her work, with the persistent sense that there is more to discover.

Marion Schmid and Emma Wilson's *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives* is part of an uninterrupted flow of engagement with Akerman's work across the world. While her works from the 1970s have been revisited in light of contemporary approaches to affect, labor, and time, her installations and documentary work, as well as her last fiction adaptations, have been the consistent object of striking scholarship dealing with dailiness, ethics, and performative gestuality.[2]

This new collection, focusing on works from the last two decades, proves how present and alive Akerman questions are: as an aesthetic interlocutor, as ethical compass, as a complex model of personally inscribed cinema and literature. The essays range from comprehensive pieces on Akerman's aesthetic interests and strategies (Roberts, Bruno, Chamarette, and Flitterman-Lewis) to strikingly original inquiries on topics such as daughters' diaries, smoking, slapstick, and the expressive potency of light in Akerman's work.

Schmid and Wilson's introduction situates Akerman in various contexts: that of her contemporaries, post-New Wave directors such as Philippe Garrel, Jean Eustache, and Jacques Doillon (a connection that deserves further probing), as well as the well-mapped modernist and American avant-garde and structural lineages of her work. In her book-ending essay, "Chantal Akerman: Filmmaker, Video Artist, Writer," Schmid adds Akerman to a French tradition of *écrivains-cinéastes* who, from Jean Cocteau and Sacha Guitry to Marguerite Duras and contemporary authors such as Virginie Despentes, have pushed critics to rethink the two forms of *écriture* in tandem. While the essential function of detailed description in Akerman's scripts (remarked upon by Delphine Seyrig in *Autour de Jeanne Dielman*)[3] is key to her hyperrealist

aesthetics, this process of visualization through words is not the sole writing deserving of attention. Schmid masterfully points to the unique embodiment of Akerman's familial affects distributed across a slippery field of pronouns in *Une famille à Bruxelles* (1998) and *Ma mère rit* (2013), and shows how Akerman modulates her distance from, and closeness to her mother, and her traumatic experience escaping the camps through her special brand of referential uncertainty and paratactic writing.

After Akerman's death but even before, with her own autobiographical references and the striking addition of *No Home Movie*, her relationship with her mother becomes a more insistent topic, adding to already existing and significant critical reflections around the nexus of Jewishness, the Holocaust, and second-generation trauma.<sup>[4]</sup> The question of that relationship, enmeshed with Akerman's emphases, is the basis of Anat Zanger's take on anamnesis in Chantal Akerman's cinema and of Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's "A Tree in the Wind," a comprehensive tracking of the various references to Judaism and its webbing and waning in Akerman's oeuvre. While one could debate when, exactly, Akerman's Jewish references start (in *Lettre d'un cinéaste* [1984], she refers to the Jewish proscription of representation; and in *Dis-Moi* [1980], she interviews three older ladies whose mothers died in the Holocaust, reserving an off-screen talk for her own mother's revelations), Flitterman-Lewis insightfully parallels two trees—the lone one that shakes with the desert wind in the opening of *No Home Movie* and another at the center of the tale recounted at the start of *Histoires d'Amérique: Food, Family, Philosophy*. In the tale, the tree, a spot for the rabbi's habitual prayers, eventually gets forgotten. But the telling of the tale about the importance of remembrance becomes, through Akerman's raspy voice, a substitute for prayer itself. This parallel between trees, a literal one flowing in the wind and another, a simple reference to an ever-distanced sense of roots, opens interesting questions as to the nature of Akerman's iconography—from deserts to trees, from abstract to concrete imagery.

Giuliana Bruno's "Passages through time and Space," due, perhaps, to its origin as a tribute, is insightful, moving, but somewhat generic in its consideration of Akerman's passages through various media. It imparts known information about the artist in her moves across media and platforms, but its overextended use of terms ("screening," for instance) distorts the precision of the temporal and affective modulations of distinct work. Similarly, Jenny Chamarette's "Ageless: Akerman's Avatars" has a promising premise—to probe an ageless Akerman, the fraught notion of generations and issues around indexicality—but it is marred by a sweeping deployment of categories such as "resistance," applied to Akerman's cinema as well as to her relation to aging.

Attesting to Akerman's boldness (a quality stressed by the editors), Carol Mavor takes a creative risk of her own with "Moeder, Maman, Mom." She plunges through distinct diaries, evoking the complex themes and affects shared by artistically inclined daughters. Playing with names (Anne Frank, Chantal Anne), taking on the ambivalences of motherhood, the secretive language of play as well as bringing up "hunger as hope" (Ernst Bloch) into her analysis of daughters with distinct backgrounds, Mavor is unafraid to nest her own mother-memories alongside imagery by Louise Bourgeois, Akerman and Frank into a mesh of common secrets that amplify the significance of a sensitivity that was, as Mavor dares to show, never Akerman's alone.

Some essays read multiple films and installations transversally through ambitious, focused lenses. This is the case with Alice Blackhurst's "Smokescreens" and Cyril Béghin's "Light out of Joint," exemplary both for their brilliant readings. For Béghin, Akerman's statement on *Maniac Summer* as a film that, as in "Hiroshima, leaves traces, but as a becoming, a film that explodes and

slides before dying” (p. 139), becomes a central tease in the argument that light may be the artist’s secret tool to join catastrophe and everydayness, as she has done in *From the East, South* or in a grotesque mode in references to everyday smoke in a kitchen, in *Demain on déménage*. The Jewish proscription on adoring or figuring images of God adds yet another dimension to Akerman’s use of light’s expressive powers. Béghin moves through distinct films *Night and Day*, *From the East*, and *Là-bas*, carefully decoding Akerman’s modulation of this abstractive dazzlement and its thematic implications: “with the shutter, the temporality of the light perverts itself, boggling perception, ... enabling mediation from every ... anonymous silhouette on what the director is talking about, the history of Israel” (p. 144).

In “Smokescreens: Notes on Cigarettes in Chantal Akerman,” Alice Blackhurst addresses the ambivalences of Akerman’s relationship to her mother’s silences, analyzing smoking as a form of cathexis, and “arrested motion that atomizes the complex relationship to pleasure, escapism, ritual and sensuality, that diffuses through Akerman’s filmography at large” (p. 44). Reading across multiple films and the haunting installation *Femmes d’Anvers en novembre*, Blackhurst sharpens central questions for Akerman in her figurations of mothers’ and daughters’ need for pause and auto-poesis—a gesture that “literally ex-presses agency” (p. 44). At the same time, she articulates the function of “smoking as an intermittent stop-gag ‘something put in someone’s mouth to keep him from speaking,’ in an attempt to staunch a voicing of the atrocious unrepresentable” (p. 47).

Hilde d’Haeyere and Steven Jacobs’s “Real Estates: The Comedy of Spaces and Things in Chantal Akerman’s *Demain on déménage*,” is a smart analysis of the film’s interior architecture. With imaginative subtitles—“Domestic Blisters,” “Family Shrines”—the authors, scholars of art history and early cinema, develop a pointed analysis of Akerman’s relation to domestic objects and slapstick. From her embodied absentmindedness, to her handling of objects, as if for the first time, they detect the germ of her fondness for the genre, its centrality to her psychic economy and persona. At the same time, they specify her particularity, her interest in “the obsolete, malfunctioning and time-worn memorabilia that refers to family shrines,” alluding to the ubiquitous diary of Akerman’s grandmother appearing in the film, as well as in her installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*.

The editors rightly remark on the unfortunate topicality of Akerman’s 1990s and 2000s concern with racism and discrimination against immigrants, given our current refugee crises. Akerman was especially attuned to the precarity of transient groups and immigrants and, since making *D’Est*, she was quite explicit about the personal and Jewish resonances of this ordeal. So Mayer’s “Texas (is not Paris) is Burning: The Drag of Dis/Orientation in Chantal Akerman’s *Sud*” and Albertine Fox’s “Vocal Landscapes: Framing Mutable Stories in *De l’autre côté* (2002) and *Une voix dans le désert* (2002)” sharply address how she shapes these ordeals.

Mayer’s important intervention relativizes Akerman’s foray into *South* (1999) by brushing it against other models of documentary and media response to the assassination of James Byrd, Jr. Noting for instance the outtake from *The Two Towns of Jasper*, as included in Kirsten Johnson’s documentary *Cameraperson* (2016), where the prosecutor holds in his hands the chains used to drag Byrd’s body through the road and flinches at its smell, Mayer is able to critically position the concrete historicity of the events vis-a-vis Akerman’s distanced shots of trees. Meant to evoke lynching, these shots may “need historical context to interpret them” (p. 106). With its cautious research and theoretical approach to temporal drag (at times with a misleading slipperiness

between the literal and theoretical implications of the term), the essay is one of the most serious approaches to a film that is problematic precisely for its lack of context.

Fox's "Vocal Landscapes," a well-researched analysis of interviews as well as of the use of music in *From the Other Side* and *Une voix dans le désert*, uses various theoretical frames on the filmmaker's "aural-ethical poetics": Lipari's "listening otherwise," Trinh Min Ha's "speaking with or nearby," and Sedgwick's "listening besides" (pp. 116-117), allow her to refine her reading of Akerman's pauses and respect for silences in her interviewees. Importantly, Fox's research on music and border studies resignifies the connotations of names, places and other Mexican particularities concerning hybridity and migration, and this aligns her own attention to that otherness Akerman so patiently registers.

Deepening her excellent prior work on *La Captive* and Proust's *La Prisonnière*, Emma Wilson's "Unknown Deaths in *La Captive*," probes Akerman's intent in creating for Ariane/Albertine a zone of opaqueness relating her resistance to Simon's possessiveness through subtle and precise readings of other forms of laying together (Anna and her mother in *Rendez-Vous d'Anna*, for example) while keeping one's autonomy. Wilson beautifully expands her take on sleepiness into an examination of death, another form of escaping from fusion. The shadows that fuse in the film as Simon and Ariane walk in the park, parallel, as she points out, that of other lovers (in *Maniac Shadows*). As Béghin pinpoints in his analysis of Akerman's *Maniac Summer* and *Maniac Shadows*, the forms of light, as well as its negative, hold intense meaning when seen in a tragic light.

Together these essays resonate as similar tropes, films, and installations recur in new configurations. It is a testament to the artist, *and* to the editors, that new thought continues to illuminate Akerman's oeuvre.

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Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "A Tree in the Wind: Chantal Akerman's Later Self-Portraits in Installation and Film"

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Cyril Béghin, “Light out of Joint”

Marion Schmid, “Chantal Akerman: Filmmaker, Video Artist, Writer”

## NOTES

[1] Nicholas Elliott, “Au Revoir Chantal,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* 716, (2015):92-94 (p. 1).

[2] With no pretense to comprehensiveness I should like to cite the excellent work done in Brazil. See *Chantal Akerman: a dossier*, ed. Roberta Veiga, *Devires: Revista de Humanidades e Letras* 7:1 (2010), with essays on the Jewish Question (Anita Leandro’s “Cartografias do Exodo”); and on the ethics of encounter in *De l’autre côté* (Carla Maia, “De Encontros e Fronteiras”). I should also mention Kate Rennenbohm’s essay, “A Pedagogy of the Image: Chantal Akerman’s Ethics Across Film and Art,” in Lucy Reynolds and Michael Mazière eds., *Besides Chantal Akerman’s Now*, a special issue of *Moving Image Review of Art Journal* 8:1-2 (2019):40-53; and Hannah Mowat, “Gesture and the cinéaste: Akerman/Agamben, Varda/Warburg” (PhD Thesis, Cambridge University, 2016), accessible at <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.6333>.

[3] Sami Frey, dir., *Autour de Jeanne Dielman* (Cinéart, 1974-2004).

[4] There is a wealth of analyses on the impact of Akerman’s mother’s experiences at the camp on Akerman’s œuvre, and a number of critics have remarked on the unconscious, autobiographical character of the filmmaker’s work. Brenda Longfellow captured early on the phantasmic core of the mother-daughter dynamic in “Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13:1-2 (1989):73-90. Janet Bergstrom uses André Green’s notion of the “dead mother,” to explain the impact on a child’s psyche in cases where the mother is affectless in “Chantal Akerman: Splitting,” in Janet Bergstrom ed., *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 283. More recently, Alisa Lebow reads the voice slippages in Akerman’s work as a “full-blown migration of the soul” in B Ruby Rich and Ivone Margulies eds., “Identity Slips: The Autobiographical Register in the Work of Chantal Akerman,” in *Chantal Akerman Dossier*, special issue of *Film Quarterly* 70:1 (Fall 2016):58. Alisa Lebow’s comprehensive reading of *From the East* in “Memory Once-Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman’s *D’Est*,” *Camera Obscura* 18:1 (2003):34-83 is exemplary but not alone in exploring the issue. Recent essays on the shape Akerman’s ruminations took in earlier and later work include Griselda Pollock, “The Long Journey: Maternal Trauma, Tears and Kisses in a Work by Chantal Akerman,” *Studies in the Maternal* 2:1 (2010):1-32; Ivone Margulies, “Elemental Akerman: *No Home Movie*,” *Film Quarterly* 70:1 (2016):61-69; Margulies, “And It’s So Tiring: Chantal Akerman’s Ruminative Economy,” in Margulies and Jeremi Szaniavski eds., *On Women’s Films: Across Worlds and Generations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019),

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pp. 49-69. See also *On Chantal Akerman: Camera Obscura and Chantal Akerman*, a special issue of *Camera obscura* 34:1 (2019), which contains significant articles by Bergstrom, Babette Mangolte on *Now*, as well as a dossier of essays presented at the symposium, "On the Difficulties of Forgetting: Chantal Akerman's Films and Artistic Procedures," The Institute of Media Studies and of Art History, Basel University, NFS Bildkritik eikones and the Cinema Stadtkino (October 21-22, 2016).

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