



Autobiographical Traces in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* and *Meetings with Anna*
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Abstract

This article explores two seminal films Akerman wrote and directed early in her career, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (Meetings with Anna) (1978), in the context of her later autobiographical writings, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (1998) and *Ma mère rit* (2013) (My Mother Laughs). While scripted many years earlier, the two films address themes later developed in *Ma mère rit* and *Une famille à Bruxelles*, notably Akerman's intense relationship with her mother and the trauma of the Shoah. The article outlines the key elements of the two films and autobiographical works and then explores a number of shared themes between the films and autobiographical writings. Firstly, it analyses the two films in the context of Ivonne Margulies' identification of "hindered communication" as a key feature in both films. It next develops an analysis of the privileged role Akerman attributes to communication within the family. The traumatic and pervasive influence of the Shoah in Akerman's films and autobiographical works is then examined in the context of her mother's history as a survivor of the camps. The article then contextualises Akerman's use of the French language in the context of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of a minor literature. Akerman's treatment of the notion of home and her usage of Freudian themes - the oedipal complex, the incest taboo and mother-daughter ambivalence - is examined with examples from both *Jeanne Dielman* and *Meetings with Anna*. In conclusion, the value of a reading of Akerman's autobiographical works, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (1998) and *Ma mère rit*, is highlighted as a means of furthering an understanding of *Jeanne Dielman* and *Meetings with Anna*.

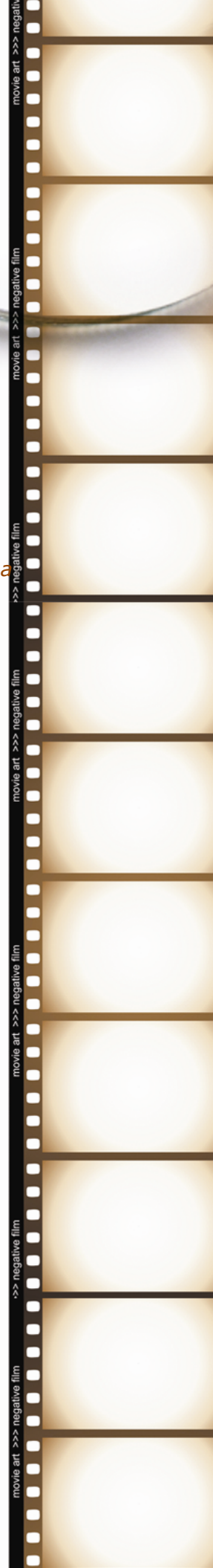
Keywords: Film; Akerman; autobiography; feminism; Meetings with Anna; Jeanne Dielman



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Autobiographical Traces in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* and *Meetings with Anna*

Stephen Carruthers

Introduction

Chantal Akerman (1950-2015) was born in Brussels into an orthodox Jewish family, who had come to Belgium from Eastern Europe in the 1930s. Her mother, Natalia Akerman (née Leibel), who died aged 86 in April 2014, survived the Auschwitz concentration camp, where her parents had been killed. Akerman's father survived the war hidden with his family in a Brussels cellar. The Holocaust created a distinct periodization, a traumatic before and after, for generations of post-Holocaust Jews that heightens the experience of loss and rupture (cultural, historical) already inherent in the passing of time. The effect for Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern European descent is the "the old country" becomes a sign without referent, an imaginary construct with no actual, geographical correlate. (Lebow, 2003, p. 36)

Akerman was a prolific filmmaker, directing 46 films, ranging from art house and experimental films such as *Toute une nuit* (1982) and *L'homme à la valise* (1983), to the more mainstream films *La Captive* (2000), based on Marcel Proust's novel *La Prisonnière* (1923), and *Almayer's Folly* (2011), based on Joseph Conrad's first novel published in 1895. Akerman was also active as an installation artist, composer, and writer.¹

Akerman's relationship with her mother was central to her work.² 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." 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. (Lebow, 2016, p. 58)

In *Une famille à Bruxelles* (1998), the narrative is told alternately by Akerman and her mother with the primary focus, told with sympathy and tenderness, on Akerman's father and the progression of his terminal illness. In *Ma mère rit* (*My Mother Laughs*) (2013),³ Akerman relates the trajectory of the serious illness of her mother, set alongside the traumatic and ultimately violent collapse of her relationship with a younger English woman, named C., alternated with passages of her mother's narration. The death of her mother in 2014, movingly documented in her last film *No Home Movie* (2015), presaged her own death by suicide a year later.

One day I even wished to kill myself but while smiling, the most important part was not forgetting to smile, as if it what I was about to do was a meaningless act. Luckily it was because I survived. I've survived everything up until now and I've often wanted to kill myself. But I told myself, I couldn't do that to my mother. Afterwards, when she's not around. (Akerman, 2019, p. 154)

This article explores two seminal films Akerman wrote and directed early in her career, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (*Meetings with Anna*) (1978), in the context of her later autobiographical writings, *Une famille à Bruxelles* and *My Mother Laughs*. While scripted many years earlier, the two films address themes later developed in *My Mother Laughs* and *Une famille à Bruxelles*, notably Akerman's intense relationship with her mother and the trauma of the Shoah.⁴

Jeanne Dielman records three days in the life of Jeanne Dielman, played by Delphine Seyrig, and her interaction over that period with her teenage son Sylvain, played by Jan Decorte, three successive male clients and the neighbour whose baby she minds, interspersed by the repetitive and increasingly erratic performance of Jeanne's domestic tasks.

Jeanne Dielman is Akerman's most sustained and powerful meditation on the mother. "I didn't escape from my mother ...", Akerman noted in an interview, " ... this is a love film to my mother. It gives recognition to that kind of woman, it gives her "a place in the sun". On one level, *Jeanne Dielman* functions as an act of reparation, a repairing of the distance between daughter and mother, a "love-film" which provides for a sublimated return to the corps à corps with the mother. Equally, it is an act of political reparation, in its loving attentiveness to the domestic world of the mother, in its precise documentation and cinematic validation of the gestures which constitute her experiential state. (Longfellow, 1989, p. 81)

The film culminates in Jeanne stabbing to death the third male client in her bedroom following an extended shot showing her climaxing during sexual intercourse.

... this was her one strength, the space she kept for herself. The fact that she was frigid was almost a protection of the one place where she was not alienated. It's supposed to be the opposite but ... if so many women are frigid, it's because they feel deep inside that that will be the last place of alienation. So, if an orgasm happened with that man, it's because she had weakened... (Kinsman, 2007, p. 221).⁵

In the final scene, Jeanne sits wordless in the living room, her inability to rise from the table encapsulating her hopelessness following this irremediable rupture in her life.

While my reading substitutes Foucauldian "surveillance" for "obsessive compulsion," I agree with Margulies that Jeanne cannot repeat or "make right" the murder scene. Unlike the burned potatoes, Jeanne cannot either re-do or un-do the physical fact of the murder, and this unco-optable failure of Jeanne's self-surveillance is the reason for the murder scene. (Kinsman 222)

Margulies notes the influence of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967).

It is possible to see *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* as representing a case of the kind explored by Godard in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, an examination of the social implications of prostitution. Jeanne's reasons for taking afternoon clients at first seem amenable to the same social and economic analysis to which Godard exposes his protagonists. But the ten-year period that separates Godard's film from Akerman's demands an understanding of the differences in their use of a woman's quotidian and the mytheme of housewife/prostitute to portray a broader social and economic picture. (1996, p. 128) Later in the same chapter, Margulies analyses the differences in Godard and Akerman's use of character.

In *Two or Three Things*, a critique of capital and semiological investigation converge in alienation. In *Jeanne Dielman*, the embrace of individual specificity and the representational hyperbole of a character's behaviour (inflected, of course, by Akerman's procedures of repetition) push the representation of the individual to the untenable point of representing both a collective entity and a pathological case – i.e., a case more peculiar and specific than any individual case. (1996, p. 146)

Akerman's portrayal of feminism in *Jeanne Dielman* is complex and contested.⁶ “While *Jeanne Dielman* can be (and was) read as a feminist film, it can also and simultaneously be seen as countercinematic, and in ways that complicate and conflict with, yet still allow feminist readings” (Kinsman, 2007, p. 217). Akerman's portrayal of Jeanne is a tribute to her mother and women trapped in the routine of domestic chores.

Chantal Akerman has said that: “I give space to things which were never—almost never—shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images ... But more than content, it's because of the style. If you show a woman's gestures so precisely, it's because you love them. In some way you recognize those gestures that have always been denied and ignored.” The pleasure in the detail is an element Akerman is identifying as a feature of a feminine style. (French, 2007, p. 170)

Akerman's next feature-length film, *Meetings with Anna*, was shot from 2 January to 23 February 1978 on a more substantial budget and cast with established actors.⁷ The central character Anna Silver, played by Aurore Clément, is a Belgian filmmaker on a promotional journey through West Germany, Belgium and France. "She [Anna] is also the diegetic stand-in for Akerman (by virtue of biographical details such as her name [Chantal *Anne* Akerman] and her profession [Anna is a filmmaker]" (Stukator, 1993, p. 126).⁸ During her travels, Anna has a series of encounters. Firstly, she meets Heinrich, played by Helmut Griem, at a showing of her film in Essen and returns with him to her hotel where they have a brief sexual encounter interrupted by Anna. The next day she visits him for his daughter's birthday at his mother's house, where he lives since his wife had abandoned him. Anna's second meeting is with Ida, played by Magali Noël, at Cologne train station. Ida is a family friend who has moved from Brussels to Germany and whose son had been engaged to Anna but twice rejected by her. The third encounter is with Hans, played by Hans Zischler, a stranger she meets on the train to Paris. The meeting with Anna's mother, played by Lea Massari, at Brussels Midi station ends in a hotel bedroom where they spend the night together and where Anna tells of her life on the road as a director and her recent lesbian encounter in Italy.⁹ The final meeting is with her lover, Daniel, played by Jean-Pierre Cassel, who collects her at the train station in Paris from where they go to a non-descript hotel room.¹⁰ As they are about to make love, Daniel falls ill and Anna leaves to bring him medicine from a late-night pharmacy. In the final scene, Anna returns to her apartment where she listens to her answering machine messages, including one from her Italian lover.

Anna's travels through the landscape of post-war Western Europe are marked by subliminal memories of the Nazi period. "*Meetings with Anna* articulates the mix of curiosity and

demilitarisation for a nation (Germany), on the part of a transnational individual (a wandering Jewish woman) in all its intricate, post-holocaust reverberations. ... Slowly, these monologues, echoing one another in their plaintive sonority, construe a troubled portrait of Europe” (Margulies, 2003, pp. 62, 64).¹¹ The film, with scenes and characters seen as influenced by Hitchcock (Margulies, 2003, p. 6; Rowley, 2010, pp. 1-2, 5-6) and the road-movie tradition, was less well-received critically than *Jeanne Dielman*.

In terms of its homogeneous texture, oblique *mise en scène* frontality, and emphasis on denaturalised dialogue, *Meetings with Anna* displays the radical antinaturalism of Erich Rohmer and Robert Bresson. And yet, the film was generically labelled a “European art film”, comparable in its theme and episodic linearity, with 1970s existentialist road-movies such as Wim Wenders’ *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the road*, 1976) and *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*, 1974). Given its production history, as well as its relative polish- this was Akerman’s first film to be distributed by Gaumont – the film was felt, at the time of its release and in the context of Akerman’s trajectory as an avant-garde narrative filmmaker, as something of an aesthetic compromise. (Margulies, 2003, p. 60)

Akerman’s principal characters in *Jeanne Dielman* and *Meetings with Anna* speak in a manner that is clear but startlingly dispassionate, “simultaneously engaging and defamiliarizing the spectator” (Margulies, 1996, p. 60). If Anna can be seen to represent Chantal Akerman and Jeanne her mother, they express a common sense of alienation as if the mother had passed on to her daughter the traumas of her past. “If Marlon Brando’s mumblings in Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954) are to signify a specific affect and feeling, Anna’s or Jeanne’s clear but distended delivery in *Meetings with Anna* and *Jeanne Dielman* also works expressively, rather than functioning solely to inform” (Margulies, 1996, p. 54). Margulies has stressed the function of Akerman’s repeated use of monologues in both films, “signs of hindered communication, sound

masses that rhythmically break the silence but are sealed from functioning as actual conversational exchange” (1996, pp. 54-55). Anna’s meeting with Hans, a solitary and rootless figure, on the train to Brussels is an example of such “hindered communication”.¹² Anna’s solitary conversation with Hans is preceded by her futile attempt to find a seat in the train’s over-crowded second class carriages. She returns to her carriage where she meets Hans in the empty corridor.

HANS. Do you know Brussels?

ANNA. That’s where I was born. I lived there for twenty years.

HANS. Twenty years?

ANNA. Yes.

Anna closes the window.

HANS. I spent a week there two years ago. I like it. Were you still there then?

ANNA. No, I left Brussels eight years ago.

HANS. Too bad. Do you know my friends there by any chance, the Vanderlindens?

ANNA. Vanderlinden?

Anna turns and looks away from the window.

Vanderlinden. Vanderlinden. Don’t they have a furniture store?

HANS. No, that’s not that.

ANNA. Then I don’t know them.

HANS. They say that Belgium’s the land of plenty.

ANNA. So they say.

HANS. Where do you live?

ANNA. Paris.

HANS. I’m going to Paris too. I’m going to live there because they say France is the land of freedom.

ANNA. So they say.

HANS. Maybe I’ll be happy there.

ANNA. Maybe.

HANS. Anyway, you’ve got to live somewhere.

ANNA. That’s true. (Akerman, 1978, 56:09-1:13)¹³

In *Jeanne Dielman*, Jeanne’s verbal interaction with her clients is minimal

The doorbell rings. Jeanne is standing in the kitchen by the gas cooker. She unbuttons her knee-length pale blue pinafore. Underneath she is wearing a dark floral blouse with a light grey

cardigan a knee-length dark skirt. She hangs up the pinafore goes over to the sink washes her hands dries them on a tea towel turns off the kitchen light and exits.

THE SECOND CALLER. Good day.

Jeanne stands by the hall cupboard takes a dark overcoat hangs up. She walks down the hall corridor to her bedroom followed by a man wearing a dark suit. Jeanne enters the bedroom. The man follows closing the door. The man opens the bedroom door into the unlit corridor followed by Jeanne who turns off the bedroom light closes the door follows the man to the entrance hall. Still in the dark Jeanne takes his overcoat from the cupboard hands to him. He puts on. Jeanne turns on hall light. The man fixes the coat collar over a white buttoned-down shirt dark tie. He takes a black wallet from his inside jacket pocket takes out a bank note hands it to Jeanne replaces wallet.

THE SECOND CALLER. See you next Thursday.

He leaves. Jeanne closes front door extinguishes hall light. She goes into dining room turns on light, removes lid from tureen places on dining table, places note inside turns, extinguishes light and leaves dining room (Akerman, 1975, 1:30:44-1:33:10).¹⁴

The sporadic and deflating nature of communication with strangers is contrasted with the intensity of the exchanges between Jeanne and her son and between Anne and her mother. It is as if Akerman is suggesting that only within the family is genuine communication possible. The deep significance of family in the work of Akerman is reflected in *Une Famille à Bruxelles* where for both Akerman and her mother family is a pervasive and self-sustaining world:

But when we speak about that [family stories] and it's not often because it's not often I am together with my two daughters, it's good because straight after a moment of silence while we look at each other with a smile or even sometimes with tears, we hug and feel together and feel we are close family and there is nothing closer and then I need to say that is not often that the three of us are together and it does good, I cannot stop myself saying it even though I know very well that my two daughters would prefer I didn't. (Akerman, 1998, p. 31)

Indeed, the presence of strangers into this hermetic world may be destabilising, and even violent, as in the relationship between Akerman and C.

Sometimes she would sleep on top of me and these strange sobs would suddenly overpower her. Rasping, childlike sobs. She's crying, she's coming. She's crying or she's coming. Maybe at the same time. I'd never heard anything like it. Sometimes I would react. Sometimes I would stay still. Death meat, she would say in English. Yes, dead meat. But we knew we were happy. (Akerman, 2019, pp. 121-122).

Margulies has noted Anna's "polite but distanced concern" from her interlocutors (2003, p. 68). She maintains aloofness not because of social unease but to protect herself from the psychological instability of those she encounters. In *My Mother Laughs*, Akerman's mother tries to convince Chantal of the importance of casual conversation.

But it's good to talk, don't you think? Yes, it's good. But you rarely want to talk. Yes, I know, sometimes I shut down or have nothing to say. But you don't have to have something to say in order to speak. You can just say something then something else, that's how people talk. You know, I love to talk. Yes, I know that maman. I know, sometimes I end up repeating myself. Don't worry, it doesn't matter. But sometimes I think it does matter, and that you can't stand it. Sometimes I can't stand it but sometimes I don't mind it. When I can't stand it it's just because I'm in a bad mood and when I'm in a bad mood I can't stand anything. So decide to be in a good mood then. (Akerman, 2019, p. 174)

While the worlds inhabited by Anna and Jeanne on the surface seem poles apart, the cosmopolitan, rootless, peripatetic existence of Anna and the narrow, constrained, Brussels-centred existence of Jeanne, the presentation of the characters below their superficial differences reveals a common malaise rooted in the traumatic experiences of a Europe still indelibly marked by the Shoah.¹⁵ None of the characters in *Meetings with Anna* explicitly recall the Shoah, although Heinrich and Ida in their meetings with Anna make brief and elliptical reference to the war

(Margulies, 2003, pp. 63-64), but its influence is nevertheless pervasive. The location of many of Anna's meetings, on trains or railway stations or in their vicinity, implicate a sense of historical foreboding given the central role the European railway system played in the Shoah. In *Jeanne Dielman*, there is reference to the death of Jeanne's parents, albeit unexplained, in a bedtime conversation between Jeanne and Sylvain.

JEANNE. Yes, he came in '44 to liberate us. They tossed chewing gum and chocolate to us, and we threw flowers to them. I met your father after the Americans had left. I was living with my aunts because my parents were dead. (Akerman, 1975, 38:08)

Akerman's mother's remained silent about her experiences in the concentration camps. My eldest daughter [Chantal] always asks me to talk about it but I don't want to. I know that if I do I'll be lost. That's what I think anyway. My eldest daughter says the opposite will happen. That it's good to talk. But she doesn't talk about much either, I mean, she doesn't talk about much about her life. Maybe she thinks what she has to say can't be said to a mother like hers. Sometimes I think it's because of what happened to me. And sometimes I think the opposite. I don't know what to think so I try not to think about it. (pp. 21-22) ... One day my mother said to me, as I was leaving that place I realised that my heart had died. Maybe it was already slightly dead when I was growing up, or maybe it had always been that way, but I don't think so. Anyway, I'll never know. And what use is there in knowing. It's probably useful when you are trying to work out if your lover means what they say, yes, sometimes it's useful, maybe often, even. But sometimes it's not. (Akerman, 2019, p. 99)

In one notable passage in *Une famille à Bruxelles*, at a time when her husband's incapacity meant he had to be placed in a nursing home, Akerman's mother almost plunged into the abyss, "I was sliding somewhere else where I mustn't and then they could also have locked me up in any event" (p. 69). Only once did her mother overtly express her loss:

When she'd finally managed to join me in the back of the car with the help of her grandson who'd carried her in, she said to me, my daughters, my daughters have everything. Me, I have nothing but the camps. It was the first time she'd said that. At other times she'd just said that she was happy and that everything had been wonderful, and suddenly there was this. (Akerman, 2019, p. 175)

In *My Mother Laughs* and *Une famille à Bruxelles*, there is a pervasive sense of the missing family members and the void this occasioned. For Akerman herself, who sought information from her mother, the background of the camps imposed an unspoken but heavy burden.

I'd had enough of all those stories about survivors. For years that was all I could think about. Now I'd had enough. Really enough. I said to myself that maybe my having enough was the start of my healing process because I was ill too. (Akerman, 2019, p. 80) Akerman was to raise these issues more directly in her later film *D'Est* (1993).¹⁶

Questions of displaced memory and indirect Jewish identity raised by Finkielkraut lie at the core of Chantal Akerman's 1996 film *D'Est* [From the East] (Belgium/France/Portugal). The Holocaust created a distinct periodization, a traumatic before and after, for generations of post-Holocaust Jews that heightens the experience of loss and rupture (cultural, historical) already inherent in the passing of time. The effect for Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern European descent is the "the old country" becomes a sign without referent, an imaginary construct with no actual, geographical correlate. Akerman's *D'Est* approaches this historical chasm in a particularly striking way, attempting to reach across this divide while simultaneously conceding the futility of the gesture. (Lebow, 2003, p. 36)

Margolis has argued that Akerman's "attempt to create a work in which history and geography do not form the backdrop for individual stories, and instead become temporal and

spatial strata of a personal-collective narrative, parallels Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*" (2003, p. 64). They define a minor literature as, "not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language. But the primary characteristics of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization".¹⁷ Although Akerman wrote in French, a major language, it's use is conditioned by Belgium's divided linguistic landscape .

Belgium is the only European country with three distinct literatures and no language of its own. Is there, then, what one might refer to as a Belgian novel? The answer to this question, if indeed it exists, is rather complex. One might safely suggest that the Belgian writers who have chosen French as their means of expression became an integral part of the community of French writers. They adhere to the *République des Lettres* at the same level as other writers from various French provinces, all seeking recognition from the intellectual bastion of *L'Ile de France*. (Dumont, 1964, p. 352)

This linguistic tension is alluded to in *Jeanne Dielman* in the scene where Jeanne is helping Sylvain with reciting in French the poem "The Enemy" by Baudelaire.

JEANNE. You've picking up the accent more and more.

SYLVAIN. I know. I can even pronounce the Rs like Yan, and no one laughs at me at school anymore.

JEANNE. Perhaps. But nobody forced you to go to the Flemish school.

Sylvain sighs.

Yes, I know - your friend.

Sylvain puts his books back in his satchel gets up from the table. And switches on light in living room.

JEANNE. I wonder if you can still say your Rs like me. (Akerman, 1975, 27:12-27:47)

Akerman's use of the French language is further complicated by her Jewish heritage and Polish family background. Her mother was of Polish origin, but all her family that had come to

Belgium had “died from one thing or another, so she had no one to speak Polish to” (Akerman, 2019, p. 46). Akerman’s own knowledge of Polish was minimal (2019, pp. 46-47).

Both Akerman’s parents residence in Brussels was rooted in the shadow of their family’s forced emigration. In *Jeanne Dielman*, the transience of place is portrayed through the invitation from Jeanne’s sister Fernande for Jeanne and Sylvain to join her family in Canada. In *Meetings with Anna*, Daniel and Anna end up at in a hotel room because “there is nothing” at Anna’s apartment (1:33:45) and Daniel “can’t stand his place” (1:33:50). In *My Mother Laughs*, Akerman expressed her sense of rootlessness through the lack of a place she could identify with as home.

I don’t know what I’ll do or where I’ll live and if I’ll end up going somewhere else. But I know I’ll leave for my apartment in Paris. I have an apartment. It’s my home. That’s what other people say, my home. But I don’t feel like I have a home or an elsewhere. There’s nowhere I feel at home. Sometimes I think I’ll go to a hotel, a home away from home where I’ll be able to write. (p. 5) ... I don’t have a life. I never learned how to make myself one for myself. Here or elsewhere. But elsewhere is always better. So that leaving and leaving again and returning is all I’ve ever been able to do. (2019, p. 18).

Freudian themes are recurrent in Akerman’s films and autobiographical writings. “Two early films by Chantal Akerman, *Les rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978) and *News from Home* (1976), explicitly evoke the pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother and explore its impact on adult female sexuality” (Molloy, 2014).¹⁸ The ambivalence in the mother-daughter relationship identified by Freud is a theme in *My Mother Laughs*: “I loved her. But I still had difficulty eating. I still got dirty all the time. And I’d still go off and spend hours walking along the beach” (p. 42).¹⁹ The Belgian writer Françoise Mallet-Joris (1930-2018) expressed a similar ambivalence towards her mother.

My mother, was she jealous, tyrannical, possessive with an element of sadism? Was she testing me, as she tested herself? It would then have been a case of an *initiation*? I don't know. I still don't know." (131) ... Her whole life long my mother incarnated for me, power. That of the adult when I was a child, and, later, that of love. Because I loved her, I admired her and I owe to her that sad science that love and pain are in me (and perhaps they were in her), inextricably linked, like two stems from different plants laid on the same tomb. (2000, p. 280; my trans.)

In *Jeanne Dielman*, Sylvain in a bedside conversation with his mother brings up his hostility to his dead father on account of his sexual relations with his mother.

SYLVAIN. He's the one who told me everything when I was ten. I said, "What you mean Dad did that to Mom?" I hated Dad for months after that, and I wanted to die. When he died, I thought it was punishment from God. Now I don't even believe in God anymore. Yan also said it wasn't just to make babies. So I started having nightmares so you'd stay with me at night and Dad wouldn't have a chance to thrust inside you.

JEANNE. You shouldn't have worried. It's late I'm turning out the light. (1:58-1:59)

Sylvain's feelings closely follow Freud's analysis of the male oedipal complex (Kinsman, 2007, p. 221).

For a time, these two relations proceed side by side, until the boy's sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent; it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification from the beginning had become manifest. An ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother makes up the content of the simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy. (Freud, 1953-1974, pp. 31-32)²⁰

Taubin has identified the psychological undertones, including subliminal incestual feelings, in the scene when Anna meets her mother at the Midi train station in Brussels and spend the night sharing a bed in a nearby hotel.²¹

This sequence, to which the desultory journey of Anna, on tour with her film, has led makes explicit the power of the maternal bond, its erotic component, the anxiety around breaking the incest taboo, and how that eroticism and anxiety might be re-cathected in “adult” romantic relationships, the kind of relationship that Anna has barely begun to explore. Rather than showing two women making love, as she had in *Je tu il elle* (74), Akerman gives us the origin of all erotic desire in the primal bond of mother and child.(2016, p. 30)

Jeanne Dielman and *Meetings with Anna*.are informed by a reading of *My Mother Laughs* and *Une famille à Bruxelles*. Thus, *Meetings with Anna* contains a number autobiographical later referenced in her autobiographical works: Anna’s nervous search for her passport on the train to Brussels (52:57) is paralleled in Akerman’s own forgetfulness related in *My Mother Laughs* (pp. 176-177); Anna’s relaxed nudity in the hotel scenes with Heinrich, her mother and Daniel, reflects Akerman’s mother’s sense of ease at being naked (7-8); and Anna recalls as a child helping her mother button up her evening gown (1:29:06,) just as Akerman recalls just such a scene in *My Mother Laughs* (p. 42). When in *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman departs from her own familial experiences, as in the relationship between Jeanne and Sylvain, the interchanges between mother and son nevertheless resonate with authenticity. Akerman’s acute sensitivity enabled her to visualise that situation, perhaps giving filmic expression to Akerman’s own wish for a brother and her father’s wish for a son (*My Mother Laughs* 42, 48).²² This empathetic strength runs as a leitmotif throughout Akerman’s oeuvre, creating a sense of personal and collective identity that gives both the films and autobiographies a shared authorial voice. Akerman in her films and her autobiographical writing was seeking to make sense of her life through a constant interrogation of her parents’ lives and the family trauma caused by the Shoah. The constancy with which she

pursued this quest throughout her artistic body of work means her autobiographic writings illuminate the traces left by her films.

But then someone said to me, it's clear from your films that you put your whole self into them. I hadn't realised that because I didn't think I knew even a part of myself, let alone my whole self. And whenever I finished a film I felt that I'd only left a small trace. I needed to leave a trace, really I did. But my body's tissue was still rotten. I liked making films but whenever I heard people talking about me using my full name I knew they were talking about someone who hadn't just left some kind of trace but something who had made something more like a body of work. And I didn't want to contradict them. No, certainly not. I didn't want to tell them that they were just traces so I told them nothing at all. (Akerman, 2019, pp. 84-85)

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ENDNOTES:

¹ See, Andrea Thoma (2020) Vertigo of presence: Chantal Akerman's *NOW*, nomadic dwelling and the 'war machine' within the context of contemporary moving image works, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 19:2, 179-201, doi: [10.1080/14702029.2019.1676998](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2019.1676998) The Fondation Chantal Akerman in collaboration with CINEMATHEK, repository of the archives of Chantal Akerman and Paradise Films, is developing a website as a center for research into Akerman's body of work: <https://chantalakerman.foundation/>

² See: Mateus Araujo and Mark Cohen (2016). Chantal Akerman, between the Mother and the World. *Film Quarterly*, 70(1), 32–38. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26413738.

³ Translated into English as *My Mother Laughs* by Corina Copp, The Song Cave, 2019. All translations in this article of *Ma mère rit* are from Copp's text. For an analysis of *Ma mère rit*, see: Marion Schmid (2016). Self-

Portrait as Visual Artist: Chantal Akerman's *Ma mère rit*. *MLN*, 131(4), 2016, pp. 1130-1147. *Project MUSE*: doi: 10.1353/min.2016.0080.

⁴ “‘Shoah,’ the biblical word for ‘destruction’, has come to signify the systematic murder of European Jewry during the Second World War. Ever since Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), the 9 ½ documentary of witnessing ‘Shoah’ – Hebrew for ‘catastrophe’ or ‘calamity’ – is the preferred term for this mass extermination of Jews.” Flitterman-Lewis, S. (2019). Ephemeral, elusive, impossible: Chantal Akerman and the concept of ‘home’. *Moving Image Review & Arts Journal*, 8(1 & 2), pp. 107-116, at p. 108

⁵ Extract from a 1977 interview with Akerman, cited in Kinsman, P. (2007). She’s Come Undone: *Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and Counter cinema. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 24, pp. 217-224.

⁶ For a review of the literature on *Jeanne Dielman* from feminist perspectives, as well as Kinsman’s own Foucauldian reading of the film, see Kinsman P. (2007). She’s Come Undone: *Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and Counter cinema. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 24, pp. 217-224.

⁷ The fonds Roman Goupil archive of material on *Meetings with Anna* is held at the Cinémathèque française. The script by Chantal Akerman and Eric de Kuyper is published as *Les Rendez-vous D’Anna*, Albatros, 1978.

⁸ Stukator, A. (1993). Critical Categories and the (Il)logic of Identity. *Revue Canadienne d’Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 2(2/3), pp. 117–28. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24402194.

⁹ For an extended analysis of Anna’s meeting with her mother, see: Taubin, A. (2016). Love: Les Rendez-vous d’Anna. *Film Comment*, 52(3), pp. 29-33. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43824966&site=jst.

¹⁰ For a study of “the cold and depersonalized spaces” in which Anna’s encounters take place, see: Valle Corpas, I. (2021). Between home and flight: interior space, time and desire in the films of Chantal Akerman. *Journal of*

Aesthetics & Culture, 13(1), pp. 1-18. doi: 10.1080/20004214.2021.1914969. See also Stukator (1993), *supra*, at p. 124.

¹¹ See also: Koehler, R. (2016). The Travels of Chantal Akerman. *Cinéaste*, 42(1), 2016, pp. 17-21, at p. 18.

¹² See, on the “consistent use of platitudes” in *Meetings with Anna*, Margulies, A. (2003), at pp. 68-69.

¹³ The dialogue is taken from the English sub-titles to Chantal Akerman’s film *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978) on the print available at archive.org/details/les-rendez-vous-d-anna?utm_source=pocket_mylist: . The timings indicated are based on this print with a running time of 2:07:33..

¹⁴ The dialogue from *Jeanne Dielman* is from the English sub-titles to the print available at: archive.org/details/jeanne-dielman-23-quai-du-commerce-1080-bruxelles-akerman?utm_source=pocket_mylist. The timings indicated are based on this print with a running time of 3:13.10.

¹⁶ For an analysis of Akerman’s 1995 film-installation, *From the East – From the East: Bordering on Fiction*, based on the film *D’Est*, See: Flitterman-Lewis (2019), *supra*, at pp. 110-112.

¹⁷ Deleuze, G. et al. (1983). What Is a Minor Literature? *Mississippi Review*, 11(3), pp. 13–33, JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/20133921. Marion Schmid (2016) refers to Akerman’s acknowledgment of the influence of Deleuze and Guattari on her work, *supra*, at n. 20, p. 1138.

¹⁸ Molloy, Missy. “Mother-Daughter Ambivalence According to Sigmund Freud and Chantal Akerman.” *PsyArt*, 2014, pp.1-8.

¹⁹ See also Stukator’s articulation of a potential psychoanalytical reading of Anna’s relationship with her mother, *supra*, at p. 120.

²⁰ Freud, Sigmund. (1953-1974). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. [S.E.]. 19. Strachey, J. (Ed.and translator), Hogarth Press.

²¹ For an example of treatment of the incest taboo in the work of Robert Musil and Thomas Mann, see: Scott, J. (2003). Oedipus Endangered; Atrean Incest and Ethical Relations in Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Huemer W. and Schuster, M-O. (Eds.) *Writing the Austrian Traditions: Relations between Philosophy and Literature*, Wirth-Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies/U. of Alberta, pp. 160-80.

²² In *Meetings with Anna*, Anna also has a brother, although it plays no part in the story (1:16:30).