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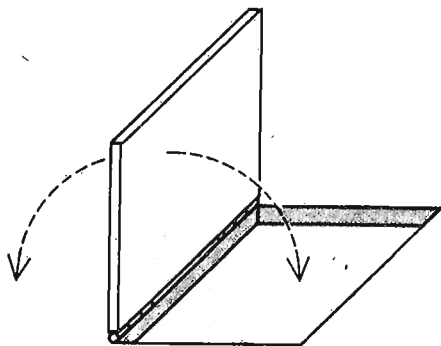
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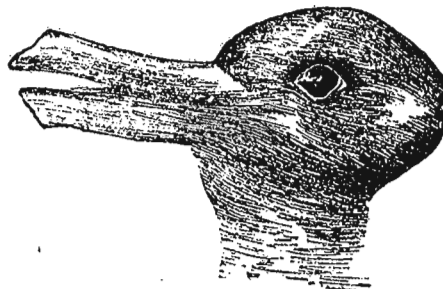
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Ewa Lajer-Burcharth

Interior & Interiority Chantal Akerman's *Là-bas*

In 1790, sentenced to a forty two days-long house arrest for fighting a duel, a young Savoyard officer, Count Xavier de Maistre, writes an account of his involuntary interiorization. Titled *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, the account takes the reader on a tour around both the dwelling in which the author is confined and his mind.¹ Written in a spirit of defiance of rules and resistance to confinement, the *Voyage* inverts the format of a travel book to explore the interior as at once a physical and a subjective space. For De Maistre's effort to describe his immediate surroundings turns into a narrative of self-reflection and self-discovery, the room transformed into a space wherein a "dialogue of the soul with its other" could be staged. The site of physical constraint thus becomes a tool for the expanded imagination of the self through which the self is repeatedly confronted with its double, giving the author an opportunity to come to terms with the dichotomous structure of his own subjectivity. The *Voyage* thus maps out the interior not as the traditional locus of subjective unity but as a topography of two-ness that recognizes the self to be that which is not always itself.² As de Maistre puts it in the conclusion of his internal travelogue: "Never have I been more keenly aware of my *double* nature."³

Chantal Akerman's 2006 film *Là-bas* (*Down there*) harks back to de Maistre spatial self-investigations. Interior is at the very core of this work which has been screened in cinemas and presented as a gallery installation. Like the *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, it is a highly idiosyncratic and personally overdetermined work, in both aesthetic and historical sense. Yet the questions it poses and its import also exceed, in my view, its strictly personal parameters.

Là-bas was shot by Akerman during her short stay in a rented apartment in Tel Aviv where she lived while she was teaching film at the local university. Half-documentary, half personal rumination, the film is "about" Israel, or rather, about Akerman's ambivalent relation to it. At once hyperrealist and imaginary, it is, one can say, a (self) portrait of a place.⁴

It was not, it must be said, a film that Akerman, a Belgian-Jewish film maker who normally lives in Paris, ever wanted to make. As she put it in an interview: "I have never desired to make a film about Israel. [When my producer] suggested it to me, [...] my immediate feeling was that it was a bad idea, even an impossible idea – almost paralyzing and downright repulsive."⁵ The artist's initial reluctance stemmed from her fear of lacking what she thought was a necessary distance from Israel, both emotional and geographic. "I was afraid my subjectivity was an obstacle, dangerous, and confused in relation to this theme."⁶ Moreover, she thought that "to contemplate Israel, one had to go to Afghanistan, or somewhere else, like New York, but certainly not Israel."⁷ But then, after a while, she came around to it. "Decisive was that one day I took the camera and sat down somewhere and suddenly there was an image, a shot. I thought it was a great picture. After that, all I had to do was wait and let things run their course."⁸

1 - *Voyage autour de ma chambre* was first published in 1794 in Chambéry.

2 - See Richard Howard's perceptive remarks in his introduction to the English edition of de Maistre's work: *Voyage around my Room. Selected Works of Xavier de Maistre*, Stephen Sartarelli (transl.), New York 1994, pp. VII–XIV.

3 - Xavier de Maistre, "Voyage autour de ma chambre," in: id., *Œuvres complètes du comte Xavier de Maistre*, Paris 1854, p. 158.

4 - The term of hyperrealism has been used in relation to Akerman's oeuvre at large, see Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens. Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, Durham / London 1996.

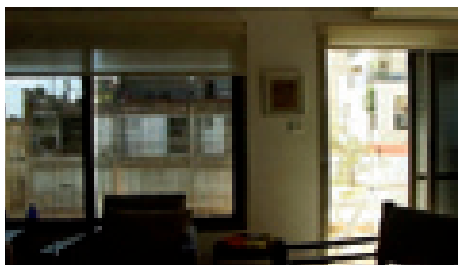
5 - Akerman's interview with Franck Nouchi, Paris, January 2006, http://www.berlinale.de/external/de/filmarchiv/doku_pdf/20064173.pdf (September 21, 2010), p. 111.

6 - Ibid.

7 - Ibid.

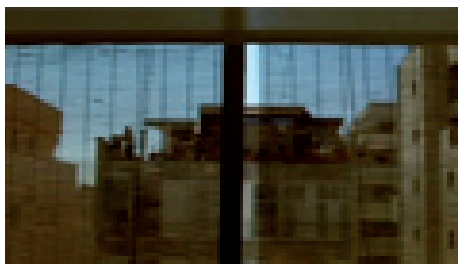
8 - Ibid.

Là-bas opens with this first shot – a view cast from inside out – that sets the tone for both what we will see in the remaining part of the film and how we will see it. From within a darkened interior, a luminous vision of the outside appears framed by the windows, awash with the distant sounds of



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006

traffic and street life. **Fig. 1** Birds chirp, children shout, a car passes by. A man could be seen at a distance leaning out from his balcony, talking to someone then rearranging his plants. The camera remains fixed as if Akerman indeed just turned it on and “let things run their course.”⁹ The circa 79 minutes-long film consists of a series of such sustained views of a Tel Aviv neighborhood as seen through the windows of Akerman’s apartment. They are not, to be sure, the same: the camera peeks through different windows at the adjacent buildings and its angle of vision occasionally changes, as does the light as the day passes by,



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006

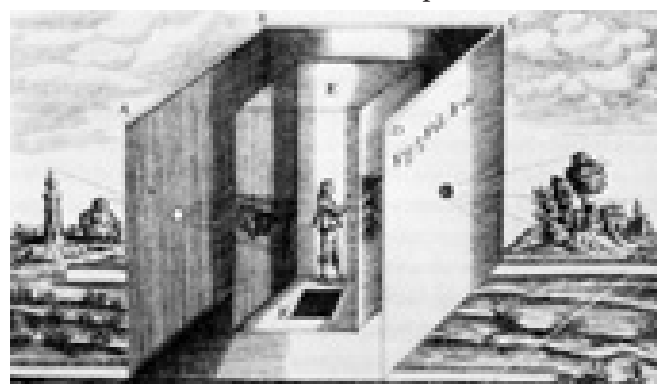
from morning to dusk. **Fig. 2** We get to see Akerman’s neighbors performing simple daily tasks – watering their plants, relaxing on their balconies, drinking coffee – but these views remain consistently uneventful, their voyeuristic potential deflated by the unimportance of the neighbors’ actions and by the manifest indifference of the camera to what it registers. If the furtive quality of some shots rings familiar – one may think of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* – they never deliver on the suspense that they generate. It is clearly not indiscretion that motivated these views. Rather, they suggest a sense of reluctance, a desire to keep the exterior at bay, qualities that may well be associated with Akerman’s initial unwillingness to make the film, of her wish to keep Israel at bay. One is reminded of the image of downtown Boston that opens Henry James’s novel *The Europeans*. Seen by James’s heroine, Eugenia, a daughter of an expatriate American who returns to her country in search of a better life, from the window of her hotel room, it is a view of the city permeated

by her reluctance to venture outside, to immerse herself in the place from which she feels estranged.¹⁰ The bamboo-stick shades through which the sonorous vision of the exterior slowly seeps inside the room remain drawn most of the time, enhancing the impression of this desired deferral of the outside. Endowing vision with texture and a degree of opacity, (suggestive especially in the views shot at dusk), they invite us to look at it, at the vision itself.

About four minutes into the film, the silent interior from within which we have been contemplating the outside suddenly comes alive as we begin to hear the shuffling sounds of someone moving about it, turning on the stove, preparing a hot drink or a snack. We see no one, though, and we never will. Throughout the film, the presence of the room’s inhabitant – Akerman herself – will be marked (with two exceptions) only by her voice which we will hear as she sporadically talks on the phone, in French, English, and Hebrew, and as she reads, in a somewhat detached manner, fragments of a narrative, partly autobiographical or family-related, partly an account of her life in Tel Aviv interspersed with more general ruminations about Israel. The voiceover will remain, though, unrelated to what we see at any given moment in the film, producing thus a sense of disjunction between the visual and the narrative / acoustic registers, the inside and the outside, the objective and the subjective, etc.

Là-Bas’s disjunctive interior functions both as the privileged locus of the film, the place from which Akerman launches her cinematic vision, and as a representation of interiority, a metonymic figure of the author and subject of this vision, Akerman herself. It is the ambivalent status of this interior, its quality as a space that is at once embedded in, and discontinuous with the exterior, *and with itself*, that I find most intriguing.

A darkened chamber from within which we look at the outside, *Là-bas’s* interior acts as a framing or mediating device, not unlike a *camera obscura* that transmits, through a relay of mirrors, a vision of the outside world for the perusal of a



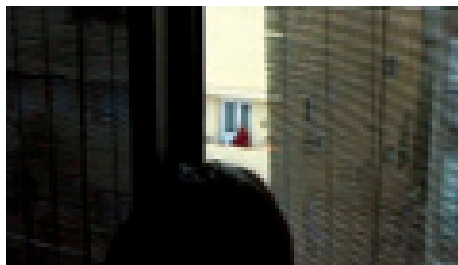
Athanasius Kircher, *Camera obscura (Ars magna lucis et umbrae, Rom 1646, Liber X, Magia Pars II, Fol. 807)*

detached observer. **Fig. 3** As a model of vision, the camera obscura is a particularly useful comparison with *Là-bas* in that it makes evident Akerman’s oblique position within the structure of her

9 - Ibid.

10 - See Henry James, *The Europeans. A Sketch*, London 1984, pp. 3–6. The novel was first published in 1878.

own vision. In the *camera obscura* model, the observer is at the center of vision, at once its prime receiver and its source. The centrality of the observer and the fixity of his position is, as Jonathan Crary has observed, key to this model.¹¹ In *Là-bas*, the camera is fixed – its immobility and the effect of extended duration it produces is, in fact, one of the most distinctive features of this film and of Akerman’s filmic œuvre in general – but it emphatically does not coincide with the body of the filmmaker. The moment we actually become aware of Akerman’s presence in the apartment, we also realize that her position is at best contiguous to the camera’s field of vision rather than being its source. (E. g., while we hear her move about, the camera, and the view it produces, remain immobile.) The two brief moments we get to see the top of the director’s head, when, as if inadvertently, she walks into the camera’s purview, serve only to emphasize her marginal, rather

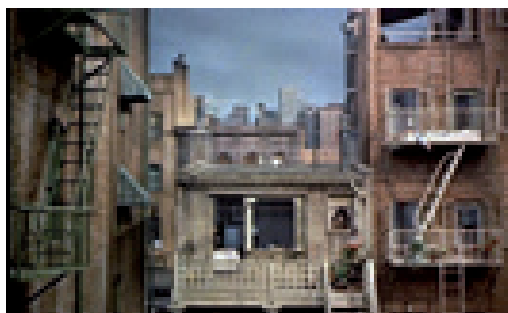


Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006

as if she stumbled into someone else’s field of vision – and in the narrative sense, in that her voiceover monologue has manifestly nothing to do with any given view offered by the film. As an author Akerman refuses, then, to be identified with her vision in any straightforward way. The notion of authorship proposed by this work amounts not to a tissue of quotations, as in the classic Barthesian recasting of this notion, but rather to a texture of unreconciled points of view, a structure of dis-aggregation.

A curious sense of the relation between interior and interiority is thus produced. On the one hand, it is quite obvious that the room that we see stands, in the bodily absence of the narrator, for the narrator herself, for Akerman, this idea being reinforced by the sound track in which she defines herself as the inhabitant of this interior and in which she talks about herself: “I live on Jonah Hanavi street, which means street of the prophet Jonah. My grandfather was named Jonah, too. And he was a descendent of the rabbi of Pelz. My cousin explains that they were ultraorthodox. They are called [here] ‘the blacks’ because of their clothing. I walked to Jonah Hanavi street, I don’t get lost. I watch TV, the French channel, I fall asleep, I get up, the plant man is already on the terrace. He seems to be watching the plants grow. I think plants don’t grow that fast, not even in Israel. On the other hand, you never know.” [1:12:30–1:13:10] On the other hand, it is just as clear that this interior is not her, that her relation to it is at best contingent, unstable, that she is both inside and outside of it (or that it is both inside and outside of her). This impression is corroborated by those aspects of her stories that emphasize her status as a mere tenant in the Tel Aviv apartment or that express her worries about having somewhat misused the space or abused her landlord’s hospitality. (E. g., she is anxious that, having eaten all the delicious bread she found in the fridge, she will not be able to replace it.) In other words, she uses the interior as a figure of her own interiority while at the same time insisting on its contingency, on her tenuous relation to it.

Cast from inside out, Akerman’s vision calls to mind the long iconographic tradition in which a “view from the window” represented the relation between the self and the world. The German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich enriched and complicated this tradition by introducing a figure looking out of the window,



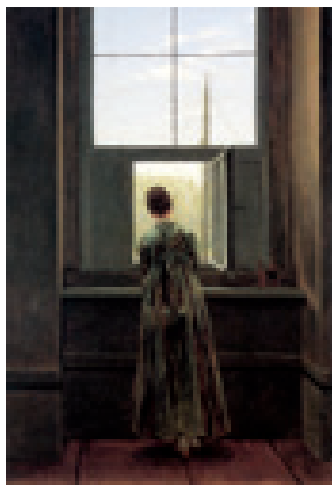
Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window*, 112 min., USA 1954

than central, place in this interior vision.¹² The detached voiceover further dispels any remaining illusion of internal unity of Akerman’s vision and its authorial consistency. Introducing an altogether different temporality, her narrative about the present and the past is never directly related to the space the narrator inhabits, or to the outside space.

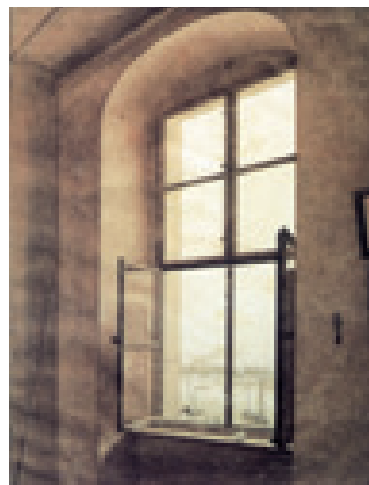
This deliberate emphasis on disconnection between the visual, acoustic and narrative registers of the film, is, let us also note, precisely what distinguishes the cinematic experience of *Là-bas* from Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, the key difference being that the latter does everything to conflate the view from the window with the gaze of its male protagonist immobilized inside. Through the traditional technique of reverse shot, Hitchcock identifies the internal vision as that of the character played by James Stewart.¹³ *Là-bas*, on the other hand, insists on the view from the window as separate from the person inside the apartment. Shunning the technique of reverse shot, Akerman remains independent or disconnected from her camera, both in the phenomenological sense of her body not coinciding with the camera’s outlook – a fact made explicit by the two instances when her head grazes the camera’s purview,

11 - See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London 1990, esp. pp. 25–66.

such as that in his *Woman at the Window* of 1822. **Fig. 7** Seen from behind, the woman in Friedrich's painting appears as a surrogate of the viewer, mediator between the interior from which we, like her, cast our view, and the outside world. Yet, she is also an *interruption* in our access to the visible world, a marker of our resolutely external position in relation to the landscape, only a fragment of which can be seen through the window. (The shutters in the lower part of the window underscore the role of the woman's body as an obstruction to, rather than a conduit of, vision.) As Joseph Leo Koerner has argued, the *Rückenfigur* in Friedrich's painting thus functions as a signpost of the self exiled from the observed world; it conveys the viewer's belated and estranged relation to nature, an estrangement that defines also the position of the painter who undertakes the task of representing nature – belatedly. ¹² That this



Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at the Window* (1822), oil on canvas, 44 x 37 cm (Staatliche Museen, Berlin)



Caspar David Friedrich, *Right Window of the Artist's Studio* (1805–1806), sepia on paper, 31 x 24 cm (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

internal, subjective vision of nature is the artist's own is the more evident when we compare Friedrich's painting with his earlier drawing, *Right Window of the Artist's Studio* (dated 1805–1806). **Fig. 8** The similarity of both the motif of the window and the landscape it offers on view make clear that the woman's room represents the interior, and interiority, of the artist, that it is, in other words, not only a physical space but a subjective realm of his connection to, and estrangement from, the visible world, the estrangement emphasized by the fact that his surrogate is a woman.

Something similar may be said of Akerman's vision the exquisitely composed frames of which remind one of painting. *Là-bas's* interior that at once conveys and postpones, if not bars, the view of the exterior may also be seen to represent an essentially exilic position in relation to the outside world, to Israel, which the artist can only contemplate from a position of an internal distance. The difference is, though, that Akerman also distances herself from the interior, that she problematizes the very assumption of the interior as the metaphor of (authorial) interiority. In relation to Friedrich's, Akerman's interior is not a space entirely separate from the exterior but permeated by it. It appears discontinuous with itself – and with Akerman as the producer of its vision. The two moments in which we catch a glimpse of the artist's body – the tip of her head we see once when she brushes her teeth and, another time, when it appears briefly when she comes close to the window – may be seen as residual instances of the *Rückenfiguren*, but, contrary to Friedrich's woman, these figural ghosts do not coincide with the artist. (She articulates herself by voice that does not coincide with these fugitive images of her body.)

The ambivalent relation between the interior and interiority formulated in *Là-bas* is in a sense typical of Akerman's entire filmic oeuvre. Her stance in this regard became clear already in *Saute ma ville* (*Blow Up My Town*, 1968), the thirteen-minute film with which, at the age of 18, Akerman has inaugurated her career as a film maker. In it, she

explodes her studio apartment situated in a high rise building in Brussels in an anarchic gesture of material and symbolic destruction of both domestic interior and psychological interiority, a destruction aimed at social (gender) as well as filmic conventions (specifically, the association of femininity with domesticity and the use of cinematic form as a tool of introspection.) Having manically performed various domestic tasks that included eating, cleaning, messing up again, and polishing her shoes together with her calves – all of it while she insouciantly hums a jolly tune – Akerman throws out her cat, seals her place with a scotch tape (note the inscription “c'est moi” on the door), turns on her stove, lights up a match and – puff! – there goes the “room of her own.” **Fig. 9/10** The deferred



Chantal Akerman, *Saute ma ville*, 13 min., Belgium 1968

quality of the image in the last sequence – we see Akerman performing her highly stylized “last rite” not directly but as a reflection in an oval mirror –

12 - See Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, London 1990, esp. pp. 112–13.

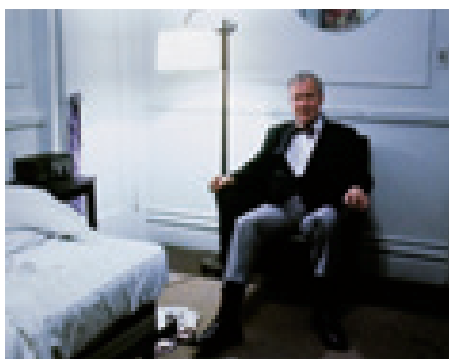
13 - Margulies, *Nothing Happens* (note 4), esp. chap. 2: “Toward a Corporeal Cinema,” pp. 42–63.

14 - Margulies refers, among others, to Bruce Nauman's *Lip Synch* (1969), Peter Campus's *mem and dor installation* (1974), Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1974), Linda Benglis's *Now* (1973), and Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1972), all of which “involve the experience of a presence never fully and instantaneously present. ‘Now’ and ‘I’ were submitted in these works to a constant vexing: they were ‘screened’ through video technology which delivered at most a mirrored, split, identity,” Margulies, *Nothing Happens* (note 4), p. 224, n. 29. One could also mention Jonas's work with the mirror and Benglis's *Mumble Jumble* made in this period.

not only underscores the ironic distance from which the young film maker looks at herself throughout the film but also, more specifically, conveys the idea of internal duplication that traverses the space of the self constructed – and destroyed – in this work.

The defiant treatment of the interior in *Saute ma ville* must be situated in the context of the avant-garde art and film practices of the late 1960s and 70s, both in Europe and in America, in relation to which Akerman forged her own stance. The common ground of these diverse practices was their critical engagement with the notion of interiority understood as psychological and semantic depth, a notion which they rejected in favor of the effects of surface, a thematic embrace of banality of everyday life, and experimental filming techniques, including that of real time. As Ivone Margulies has demonstrated in her analysis of Akerman's oeuvre, especially important for the artist's early work was the concern with performance and duration evident in the minimalist/structural film work of Michael Snow; in real-time cinematic experiments of Andy Warhol, and in the performances and films of Yvonne Rainer, among others.¹³ A number of other artists working in the 1970s, many among them using video as their medium, e. g. Bruce Nauman, Peter Campus, Richard Serra, Joan Jonas and Linda Benglis, explored different scenarios of dislocation of the self through simple performative acts marked by the sense of disjunction between the image and the voice.¹⁴ Nauman's 1969 work *Lip Synch* epitomizes this play with the discrepancies between image and language that underlay most of the art done in this period. In it Nauman, holding the camera upside down, zeroed-in on a close-up of his mouth, producing an image of his lips and tongue that articulated the words "lip sync" while the audio track shifted in and out of sync with the video. Closer to Akerman's work in its focus on a female protagonist is Yvonne Rainer's 1974 *Film About a Woman Who ...*, in which the dialogue between the actors and the voiceover commentary are presented as text on flash cards that, much like the captions in the silent movies, interrupt the flow of images.¹⁵ Yet, what was at stake in this and other experimental work was not only a disruption of the diegetic flow and a de-narrativization of the image but above all a destabilization of the idea of the self-same self.

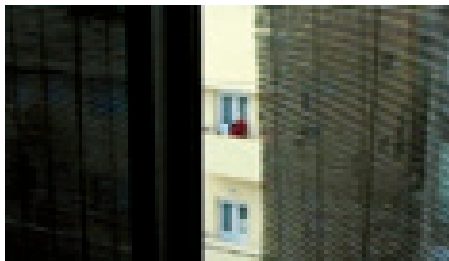
In much of her work, Akerman, too, challenged the notion of the self-same interiority, while keeping the image of a physical, inhabited interior front and center. It has been noted that, rather than a mere location, the interior space has been the protagonist of her work.¹⁶ This is perhaps best illustrated by her 1972 film *Hotel Monterey*. The film consists of a series of shots of a low-rent hotel in Manhattan, a dwelling of many Jewish exiles, which begins in the lobby at night and ends on the roof in the morning. We are presented with a sustained portrayal of the hotel's corridors, its elevator, and its desolate rooms in which, occasionally, a lone dweller would



Chantal Akerman, *Hotel Monterey*, 62 min., USA 1972

appear. **Fig. 11** The way Akerman films these interiors, with her signature long takes and perpendicular deep focus shots with fixed camera and a total absence of a narrative (the circa one-hour long film is mute), creates, as one scholar has noted, a "powerful impression of what it is to be an outsider observing these locales."¹⁷ Patiently observed and carefully composed, these hotel interiors may be seen to reflect on the Heideggerian question: "What is it to dwell?" – a question, one may imagine, of special resonance for the Jewish exiles who lived in the hotel.¹⁸

In a sense, *Là-bas* restages the visual scenario of *Hotel Monterey* for a similar, if more directly personal purpose. From within, Akerman casts here an outsider's look not only on others' dwellings and on the apartment in which she temporarily dwells, but onto herself. Her question, to paraphrase one of her voiceover commentaries is, "What is it to set the roots down in space?" – a question accompanied by her avowals of uprootedness, her sense of not belonging, of being set afloat, a condition in which she takes no pride or pleasure. Nothing conveys this more explicitly than Akerman's long monologue accompanying an oblique shot of the building across the street from her apartment appearing in a crack between



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006

the drawn blinds. **Fig. 12** It is worth quoting in extenso:

"I don't feel like I belong. And that's without real pain, without pride. Pride happens. No, I am just disconnected. From practically everything. I have a few anchors, and sometimes I let them go, or they let me go, and I drift. That is, most of the time. Sometimes I hang on for a few days, minutes, seconds. Then I let go again. I can hardly look, I can hardly hear. Semi-blind, semi-deaf, I float. Sometimes I sink, but not quite. Something, sometimes a detail, brings me

15 – Babette Mangolte, who was the camera person for Rainer, was also Akerman's favorite early on. For aesthetic connection between the work of Rainer and Akerman, see also Maureen Turim, "Personal Pronouncements in *I... You ... He ... She and Portrait of A Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels*," in: *Identity and Memory. The Films of Chantal Akerman*, Gwendolyn A. Foster (ed.), Trowbridge 1999, esp. pp. 24–25.

16 – Bill Arning, "Down There (*Là-bas*)," in: Terrie Sultan (ed.), *Exh.-cat. Chantal Akerman Moving Through Time and Space*, Blaffer Gallery, The Art Museum of the University of Houston, New York 2008, p. 42. Akerman's early *La Chambre 2* may also be mentioned here. In it Akerman uses rotation – the 360-degree pan – to account for her space. This rotating purview represents both the filmic space and Akerman's interior, identifying one with the other.

17 – Margulies, *Nothing Happens* (note 4).

18 – See Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in: id., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter (transl.), New York 1971, p. 145.

back to the surface, and I start floating again. I feel so disconnected that I cannot even have a house with bread, coffee, milk, toilet paper, and when I buy some, I feel like it is an heroic act. Basically, I don't know how to live, or go anywhere. When I take the bus, it is a state of heroism, too. And this all has to do with that, with Israel or not-Israel. Of course, not real Israel, with Israel where all of the sudden I would belong. But I know that's also a mirage. Something in me has been damaged, my relationship with the real, with daily life. How do you make a life in a non-rarified air? It starts with bread in the house, a minimum of order, a minimum of life. And besides all that, I lose everything, my keys, my glasses, my notes, my sister, and almost my mother. My notes on Israel, too. Because after months of non-reflection, but reflection nonetheless, I finally accepted Xavier's offer, and I started to take some notes. I lost my notes in Spain, a big, blue and white-checked notebook. I either left this big notebook at the movies – that was the first time I had gone in months, and I went with my niece, otherwise I would have stayed in bed at the hotel – I either lost the notes at the movies, or at the fast food place we went to before the movies. I didn't go back to look for them – out of laziness, out of boredom, but mostly out of lack of desire, or out of parasites of desire, disrupted, or worse. Out of the feeling that, if I sink, well, then I should just sink. I should just deny myself, like I usually do, except sometimes, in spurts. That's what I generally do, except for my notes, or work, when I still manage to work, I refuse to let all the rest near the surface, sometimes, and it's getting harder and harder."¹⁹

As this probing self-description makes clear, Akerman's disconnection is evident even on the most basic register of her existence – taking care of her daily needs, keeping house in order, getting food and supplies – results from a kind of damage within her which, as she puts it obliquely, “has to do with [...] Israel, or not-Israel.” This damage, or disjuncture, also defines the film maker's relation to her work – her frequent incapacity to sustain or hold on to it – and inscribes the work itself, as the oblique, deferred, and internally split view of the neighboring building from behind the bamboo blinds indicates. As other voiced-over monologues suggest, Akerman accepts her uprootedness as part of her heritage which she identifies less with the traditional diasporic mode of Jewish existence than with the burdens borne by the second generation survivors of the Holocaust to which she belongs. Her stories about her aunt Ruth who survived the Holocaust but was psychologically damaged and ended up committing suicide, appear at several moments in the film, as do references to Amos Oz, the Israeli writer, whose mother also killed herself “on one rainy day in Israel.” These stories obviously resonate with the confession of the author's own internal damage, her disoriented and unmoored existence in the real world, her tangential relation to the requirement of everyday life, and her readiness for resignation in the face of dispossession (as when she lost her notes for the film but made no effort to retrieve them: “If I sink, well, then I should just sink.”)

A curious space of self-reflection thus emerges in *Là-bas*, one of which the interior is

both the means and the site. It is, though, not exactly a space used to acquire a critical distance towards oneself, as one interpreter of the film has suggested.²⁰ Rather, it is a space that represents the self's radically discontinuous relation – not only to the place, but also to itself, this discontinuity being the very condition of the internal negotiations the subject thus envisioned conducts with herself.

The internal discontinuity of *Là-bas* distinguishes it from some of the similar earlier projects of the European film avant-garde. I am reminded, for example, of Józef Robakowski's *From My Window* (*Z mojego okna*, 1978–1985), a classic of Polish filmic avant-garde that offers a comparable investigation of the place from an interiorized position.²¹ **Figs. 12** Produced in the span of nearly a decade, *From My Window* is at once intensely descriptive and a subtly ironic document of everyday life in Łódź as seen from Robakowski's window in a high-rise building. Yet, while physically and ironically distanced from the observed reality, this vision – like that of Hitchcock's in *Rear Window*, which it obviously tropes – is firmly identified with Robakowski's point of view, a point reinforced by his voiceover commenting on what we see at any given moment. In Akerman, on the other hand, the camera's view is detached from both Akerman – the narrator – and her physical person. While in Robakowski's work the authorial persona of the film maker assumes, and subsumes, the interior, in *Là-bas*, the interior is given a quasi-autonomous existence as, indeed, an autonomous “actor” in the film, a space besides, and in excess of, the author.

It is as such that the interior in *Là-bas* serves Akerman as a tool through which she situates herself in relation to Israel and, reversibly, envisions Israel in relation to herself. The country is thus located both inside and outside herself and, as such, it produces ambivalent effects, registered on both serious and trivial levels. On the one hand, we are told that part of the reason why Akerman remains enclosed in her Tel Aviv apartment is that she got sick, as she recounts, from eating one of those “wonderful salads they have here in Israel,” a statement that, evoking the image of her “poisoned” interior, links the notion of interiorization (of Israel) to contamination. On the other hand, it is a place that she feels connected to, if ambivalently. It is like the Hebrew she had once learned at school and thought to have forgotten, only to realize, when speaking to a Tel Aviv friend on the phone, that she remembered it better than she thought. She is inescapably Jewish, an identity that her stay in Israel makes her particularly self-conscious about. As she put it in her half-defiant, half-resigned response to the immigration officer who, upon her arrival in Israel, asked her if she wanted him to stamp her passport: “Sure I do. [...] I will not escape the yellow star. It is written inside me.” [33:80] At the same time, she repeatedly

19 - Transcription E. L.-B., Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006, 22:07–24:53.

20 - This is the one point in Bill Arning's perceptive analysis of the film that I disagree with, see Arning, *Down there* (note 16).

21 - This 16mm film has been re-edited in 1999.



Jozef Robakowski, *Z Mojego okna*, 19 min., Poland 2000

shows herself *not to coincide* with the place she carries inside – she refuses it and yet cannot fully reject it.

These verbal and visual negotiations are, then, not exactly about distancing herself from Israel, or for that matter from herself. Rather, they put forward the idea of a self that is *non-identical to itself*. It is the at once personal and historical ramifications of this idea that the film explores. For if the Tel Aviv interior serves as a locus through which Akerman visualizes her tenuous hold on her own self, it also indicates that this tenuousness is both personally and historically determined, that it has to do with her history as the first post-Holocaust generation Jew. The film insists on the idea of the place – and what it stands for – as key for one's self-definition yet it also problematizes the idea of identification with, and belonging to the place. Granddaughter of a rabbi from Pelz, Akerman recites her family lineage as if it were a lesson she must learn, a heritage she has not fully assumed. ("I feel it, no I don't feel it," she tergiversates [1:04].) Like Friedrich's figure estranged from nature which it contemplates, Akerman can only look at the place of her familial origins, Pelz, from afar, from Israel. She comes to it belatedly, as an exile from her own past, which is to say, from herself.

Yet, she is equally disconnected from Israel, desirable as this location may be for the post-Holocaust generation of Jews. Throughout the film, she remains ambivalent towards the "promised land" which does not always deliver on its promise – not for her family, anyway. Not for Aunt Ruth, for whom it was too late to come "down there." Not for Akerman herself, though she speculates what would have happened, what would her life be like, had her father, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust, followed up on his dream of settling "down there," rather than in Brussels. But he didn't. Israel has remained for Akerman a location "down there," at once familiar and strange, a site of repose inscribed by violence – old and new. Her laconic account of a bomb explosion that happened unexpectedly in her Tel Aviv neighborhood, killing four people and injuring many others while she slept ensconced in her apartment, serves as a reminder of the new violence associated with the place. It is as if the violence of the past that left an indelible mark on her family history, as it did more generally on the history of European Jews, was inescapably, if differently, part of the present. "It is complicated," as she puts it.

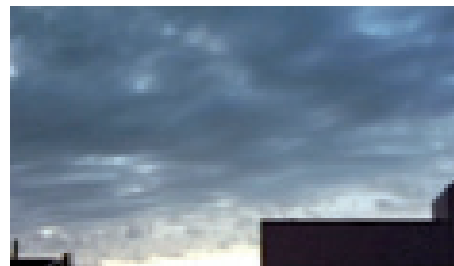
Such a statement may well be seen as an ethical evasion: that Akerman does not even mention Palestinians in her ruminations on Israel, even when she talks about the problem of its internal violence, has been seen as a regrettable disavowal of political reality in this country.²² Yet it seems to me that the film sketches out instead what may be called an ethics of ambivalence, an ethics based, that is, in a resolutely *non-identitarian* conception of the place and of the self. Rather than deliberately "forgetting" about Palestinians, or reasserting the Jewishness of the place, the film

seems to me to be posing a question that paraphrases Montesquieu's famous query in the Persian letters: "How can one be Jewish?"²³

Ultimately, what *Là-bas* produces is a complex account of a self which is both spatially and historically located, and profoundly irreducible to this location. Interiority is defined here as a specific place but also as an imaginary space, nothing one has or is but rather something one has to continuously re-imagine and re-present. It is in the process of re-presentation that the self can give an account of itself, an account that is, in the version offered by Akerman, at once lucid and opaque, as is the room in which it unfolds, cast in shadow, yet with light seeping in, a room in which, between light and darkness, the inside and the outside, a vision of the irreducibly doubled – othered – structure of subjectivity may be seen to emerge.

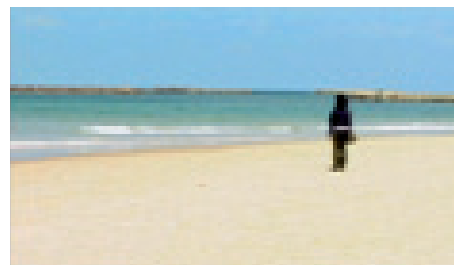
It is not only that every moment of the film, the very structure of each image, is doubled from within. It is also that the internal othering becomes the very principle according to which the film unfolds in its discontinuous and disjunctive mode, its heterogenous structure becoming the more apparent as we move, with Akerman's voice and camera, back and forth, between the inside and the outside, between the real and the imaginary spaces evoked by her narratives and her images. The three separate sequences in the film when the camera actually does take us outside of the apartment in which we for so long dwelled, reemphasize this.

First, not unlike in the *Hotel Monterey*, we suddenly find ourselves on the roof of the building where Akerman's Tel Aviv apartment is located. We see the distant sea, then the sky, with thick clouds and some views of the local beach with



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006

people strolling on it. **Fig. 14** Then, as abruptly, we are brought back to the apartment. The second cut to the outside comes in about three quarters of the film: this time the camera registers Akerman's own foray onto the beach to look at the sea. **Fig. 15**

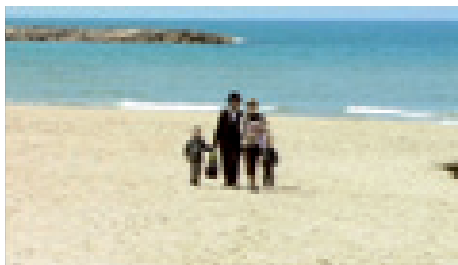


Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006

22 – See Greg Youmans's rich discussion of the film in which this point is made: "Ghosted Documentary. Chantal Akerman's *Là-bas*," in: *Millenium. Film Journal*, 51, 2009, pp. 71–80.

23 – The original query was "How can one be Persian?" Uttered by an incredulous Parisian confronted by a foreigner on the street, it was intended as a critique of the inability of the French conceiving of otherness, see Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, Jean Starobinski (ed.), Paris 2003.

We look at her from a distance while she stands immobile, like a sentinel, in front of the lapping waves. Then she turns around and leaves. The camera latches onto other people, walking and playing on the beach. The views are taken with a zooming lens, the distance made palpable by the slight graininess of the image. The camera does not follow the people's movements: they come in and out of its field of vision, as does the family of the orthodox Jews that walks towards the camera, obviously without seeing it, before turning to the



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas*, 79 min., France / Belgium 2006

right and exiting the frame. **Fig. 16** Life is going on as usual. Sun sets, dusk falls. A plane crosses the sky. Akerman emphasizes the contingency of her vision of the exterior, as if to avoid the picturesque effect, avoid, that is, visually to produce the exoticism of the place, the Jewishness of Israel. The orthodox family walking towards us is precisely the kind of image that she could only present as if by chance, that hints at the kind of film about Israel that she did not want to make, could not imagine herself making.

Again, we return back into the apartment. Time passes. More personal narrative ensues, more views of the outside through the blinds. The third outdoor sequence occurs close to the end of the film. We are on the roof again. We see the roofs of the surrounding buildings, the distant sea, and the sky. We hear the noise of the street and of the planes. Then again we are back in the apartment where a voice of a TV or radio speaker could be heard. Out again – night sky, the lights of a crossing plane cut through it, somehow ominously, some confusion – and in again. The film ends with the view from the inside, with blinds pulled up.

What, then, is the function of these outdoor sequences in this sustained investigation of the interior? One could obviously see them as a form of periodic liberation from the constraint of the inside, a release from its claustrophobic enclosure. The at once protective and oppressive dimension of domestic space in Akerman's filmic oeuvre has been recognized, notably by Ivone Margulies.²⁴ In Margulies's view, this ambivalence has to do with the function of the interior as the means of negotiating the maternal space in relation to which Akerman develops her own creative realm. As Margulies has put it, while "the opening sentence of [Beckett's] *Molloy* is 'I am in my mother's room,'" the phrase defining Akerman's work could well be "I am in a room next to my mother's."²⁵

Là-bas may indeed be seen as an investigation of Akerman's creativity, or, more precisely, of its spatial conditions. (The monologue in which the film maker reminisces about her mother not allowing her to play outside with other kids when she was young, the interdiction that led her to develop a habit of looking at length through the window – "I look, and I get all holed up inside myself" – does indeed point in this direction, hinting at a paradoxical link between maternal oppression, spatial confinement, and budding creativity.²⁶ In this perspective, Akerman's venturing outside could be seen as a self-assertive gesture, a circumnavigation of the inside from the outside aimed at defining the boundaries of the interior as the site of her creative autonomy. In other words, if *Là-bas* may be seen to represent the film maker's creative "room of her own," it is insofar as she constructs it by herself both from within and without.

And yet, let us note that, as shown in *Là-bas*, this "room of her own" does not entirely belong to Akerman, nor does *she* belong entirely to it. It is a heterogeneous space, traversed by the visual and narrative evocation of others, a doubled space, discontinuous with itself. (It is as if the mother's room was not next to Akerman's but rather inhabited, or haunted, from within.) The sequences shot outside further complicate the sense of belonging conveyed by this vision of space. Rather than liberation from the constraint of interior, I would see them as the representation of the exterior that inscribes her vision not only from without but also from within. That is, I would see these sequences as an avowal of the radical – historical, cultural – permeability of the interior. It is in this regard, as an articulation of spatial, and temporal, discontinuity, that the film seems to me to be not only "about" Akerman's creativity but also about a certain conception of the self that, close as it may be to Akerman's own, is irreducible to her person, has a collective relevance. Akerman herself seems to have left the possibility of discerning a public dimension in the personal material open. She has once said: "I haven't tried to find a compromise between myself and others. I have thought that the more particular I am the more I address the general."²⁷

It seems to me then that, beyond its intimate agenda, *Là-bas* formulates something of a broader import. In its repeated staging of the interior as a split and splitting space, a space that is non-identical to itself, it not only registers the internal heterogeneity of an individual person; it also suggests that such internally discontinuous notion of the individual may be useful for re-imagining a community, for developing a non-identitarian notion of collectivity: one based in history, rooted in the past, and in the place, but ultimately not identical with it. This is, to my mind, the ethical challenge posed by *Là-bas*. ●

24 – See Ivone Margulies, "Chambre Akerman. The Captive as Creator," <http://www.rouge.com.au/10/akerman.html> (September 9, 2010). For the function of enclosure in Akerman's work, see also Jacques Polet, "La problématique de l'enfermement dans l'univers filmique de Chantal Akerman," in: *Chantal Akerman*, Jacqueline Aubenas (ed.), Brussels 1982 (= *Les ateliers des arts*, 1), p. 171.

25 – Margulies, *Chambre Akerman* (note 24).

26 – Akerman, *Là-bas* (note 19), 1:05:00. For Akerman, there seems to be, therefore, a direct link between the view from the window, such as the views of *Là-bas*, and creative impulse.

27 – Akerman 1982, cited by Margulies, *Nothing happens* (note 4), p. 1.