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Para meus pais,

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project began when I first saw Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and was mesmerized by the hyper-reality of everyday gestures. My interest in minimalism and in the notion of nothing happening in modern realist cinema was sharpened during Bill Simon's dissertation seminar and later in a talk with Ismail Xavier (University of São Paulo) who suggested I restrict my inquiry to this seminal filmmaker of the early seventies.

In writing this book I again confirmed my closest friends' generosity. I would like to thank Catherine Russell for reading this work in its many shapes and for her perceptive and generous criticism. From Mark Cohen, one of the world's greatest readers, I profit everyday. His demand that I do my best always slightly surpassed in pressure his loving sympathy for my desire to finish, and him I thank for the final form this book takes.

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**NOTHING HAPPENS**

# CHANTAL AKERMAN'S FILMS

## The Politics of the Singular

*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.*—Chantal Akerman, 1982

Chantal Akerman's films seem to alternate between containment, order, and symmetry, on the one hand, and on the other a dry intensity that registers as the reverse of restraint: lack of control, obsession, explosion. Akerman's very first film, the short *Saute ma ville* (Blow up my town, 1968), features the director herself, then eighteen, performing a series of actions that alternate between clearly focused projects (cleaning, cooking, eating, committing suicide) and excess—an uncontrolled mess. *Saute ma ville* is *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) run amok.

Akerman enters her apartment in *Saute ma ville* by racing the elevator up the stairs while parodically humming a classical tune. Coming in through the back door of a tiny studio apartment that is mostly kitchen, she begins her domestic routine. *Jeanne Dielman* gets its structure from this kind of routine; there, order is the mask for chaos. In *Saute ma ville*, though, order and chaos coexist as strobic intermittencies in a jerky kind of performance. Cleaning her shoes while wearing them, Akerman's character continues her obsessive polishing until she has brushed her legs black. Her furious attempt to clean the kitchen leaves clutter in its trail, as a messy jumble of objects—all of them domestic cleaning tools, precisely the signifiers of neatness and hygiene—stain the regime that she tries to impose. In *Jeanne Dielman*, faulty timing replaces boredom with anxiety,

efficiency with clumsiness; in *Saute ma ville,* a similar lack of control appears not as order's flip side but as its correlate.

Slurring the onomatopoeic words "Scotch, Scotch" in voice-over, Akerman cleans, cooks, and seals the studio doors with Scotch tape. Fury and determination reinforce the precision with which she performs these tasks, yet the pattern she follows is peculiar: childishly clumsy, the same gestures produce mess and tidiness simultaneously. For a while, the viewer is enthralled with trying to sort one out from the other; there is a pleasure in watching these fully finished actions, a result of the rapidity with which mess and neatness seem reciprocally to wipe each other out. The effect is heightened by the film's focus and attentiveness, which Akerman imposes by the use of extended shots.

Through the stylized performance of her apparently purposeless, adolescent gestures, and through the composure and symmetry of her framing and an out-of-synch voice-track (in which Akerman laughs and sing-hums), Akerman cleanses her narrative of anecdote and of psychological overtones.[1] The performance also has a presentational quality that dispels dramatic development. Excess and order, the coupling terms of the scenario, are simultaneously erased before the film's closure: Akerman lights a match, blows some balloons as her voice over utters, cartoonlike, "Bang! Bang!" She leans over the stove holding the bouquet of flowers she brought from the street, turns on the gas, and holds the lit match. A freeze-frame of the scene, shot in a mirror, is replaced by black leader, over which is heard the sound of an explosion.

Akerman has said that Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965) was her first major cinematic experience.[2] She claims that she "decided to make movies the same night" she saw it, and that she later missed out on a lot of good films by trying to find *Pierrot le fou* in them.[3] Akerman entered cinema as an autodidact. She was accepted to the four-year program of the Institut Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle et Technique de Diffusion, a Belgian film school, but abandoned it after a few months to make *Saute ma ville,* a thirteen-minute black-and-white film in 35 mm. She produced this short independently by selling three-dollar shares on the diamond exchange in Antwerp. To supplement the budget, she took clerical jobs.[4] *Saute ma ville* was shown at the Oberhausen short-film festival in 1971.

*Pierrot le fou* ends with Jean-Paul Belmondo's doomed attempt to prevent an explosion of dynamite. The idea of explosion that fuels *Saute ma ville* seems borrowed from the general mood of unrestrained, unbounded energy in *Pierrot le fou,* a film of anarchic force which at its limit makes it impossible to distinguish despair from gaiety, tragedy from visual effect.

Akerman shares this sense of unassimilated energy with Godard, and it reappears throughout her work. She also shares with Godard, and with Michael Snow and Andy Warhol, a purposeful lack of hierarchy between the depiction of drama and the depiction of the surface of things. The episodes of *Saute ma ville,* for example, are discrete, and joined by dissolves they dissolve not only narrative but intentionality itself. And the gestures are at once mundane and arbitrary, so that the passage from description to drama isn't noticeable in terms of content. Two modes of organization—one geared toward plot (fragmentary as it might seem), the other a phenomenological approach to plot's "uneventful" background—are blended.

During a lengthy stay in New York in 1971–72, Akerman came in contact with the American experimental film scene. At Anthology Film Archives she saw the work of Warhol and Snow, as well as Jonas Mekas's diary films, which she has compared to "homemade cooking."[5] She was particularly impressed with Snow's *La Région Centrale,* which, she admits, opened her "mind to . . . the relationship between film and your body, time as the most important thing in film, time and energy."[6] In 1972 she began her long collaboration with the cinematographer Babette Mangolte with two short films, *La Chambre 1* (The room 1) and *La Chambre 2* (the room 2), and her first feature, *Hotel Monterey.* These films show her debt to structural filmmaking, and to Snow—a matter of making the image waver between its "concrete/materialist" status and its "naturalist/representational" one. Extended duration becomes the cinematic transformer for a to-and-fro passage between abstraction and figuration.

In her proposal for a film of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel *The Manor,* as she briefly explains her turn from avant-garde film to narrative, Akerman refers to this oscillation between abstraction and figuration as a simple matter of going through phases:

> When I made my first film . . . I was interested not in style or form but in saying something that was on my mind . . . then I started to think about style and form, and then only about them. . . . and then there are phases . . . as in painting. I passed through a phase in which it was inconceivable to be "figurative" or "narrative"; you had to go through abstraction. Now, with the conquest of the abstract, you can again make either the figurative or the abstract. But this figurative will never be the same again.[7]

The easy dialectical resolution of this account obscures the degree to which Akerman's work holds the figurative and the literal, the dramatic

and the mundane, in unstable poise. In Akerman's cinematic strategies, figuration is indeed "never the same again." Indeed *Saute ma ville* inaugurates Akerman's characteristic oscillation between registers with an explosive dissolution of orders. The film's leap from the personal (the "intentional" self-annihilation by lighting a match over a gas stove) to the public (the "blow up my town" of the title) figures her reach, which is both formal and political. This least ambitious of Akerman's films suggests how loaded her refusal to discriminate between registers can be.

*Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* investigates some of the effects of Akerman's strategic indiscrimination between registers—the alternation between representation and abstraction in her minimal/hyperrealist style. More broadly, it looks at how modernism and realism dialogically negotiate their respective terrains in cinema. Its title is intended to suggest a dual ambition: to pursue what happens when "nothing happens" in Akerman's films, and to offer an abridged genealogy of the association between extended duration and the thematics of the everyday in European postwar cinema. As it maps the social and cultural panorama traversed by Akerman's films, the book traces the historical and cultural contours of her concern to articulate the minor (the banal, the underprivileged) and the minimal (in her antipsychological, sparse, dedramatized narrative). I follow three main lines of inquiry: Akerman's thematic concern with women and the everyday, her formal use of extended duration and radical ellipsis, and her notion of type.

In my inquiry into the issue of women's everyday existence, *Jeanne Dielman* is the principal text. Akerman herself has described this film as seeking to show what the ellipses of conventional narrative usually omit— to show the "images between the images."[8] To the extent that it analyzes the relation between representation and reality precisely through attention to these "leftovers" of conventional narrative, *Jeanne Dielman* is an original, revisionist reading of a pervasive issue in the aesthetics of modern realist cinema.

Akerman's phenomenological bent is in general accord with the addressing of women's private sphere in early '70s feminism, for example in documentaries like *Janie's Janie, Three Women* (1971), and *Joyce at 34* (1972). These films, engendered directly by the feminist movement, partake of the idea of transparency that is endemic in socially corrective realist cinema: the belief in the cinematographic record as an automatic guarantee of cinema's inclusiveness. Akerman's cinema departs from them in its dry experimental style, sharing in the second-wave feminist cinema's attempts to create films that are formally provocative at the

same time that they are politically engaged.[9] Widely considered a crucial feminist text of the '70s, *Jeanne Dielman* has been seen as providing a radical alternative to traditional narrative cinema's representation of women, and also to conventional cinema itself.[10] The film's minimalist structure and hyperrealist gaze redirect an energy found elsewhere in Warhol's politics of indifference, an energy of relentless scrutiny that moves toward the context of '70s feminist politics.

The film's force is based on an inversion: *Jeanne Dielman* undoes the usual association of drama with emotional intensity, and of extended duration and temporal distension with boredom. Almost classical in its construction, *Jeanne Dielman* works like a time bomb. The symmetry of its shots (as in most of Akerman's films), the range of its color (the palette recalls Flemish painting),[11] the linearity of its story (the division into successive parts, a first, second, and third day, and the resolute movement toward closure)—all work to associate this movie with the classical narrative and mild disjunctions of the European art film.[12] Against this frame of expectation, though, *Jeanne Dielman* painstakingly displays its unconventionality—when, for example, a shot of a mundane kitchen activity is held until the task is completed.[13] At the same time, Akerman also revises conventional analytic editing through radical ellipses and an absence of reverse shots.[14]

A reference in any discussion of feminist and women's film, *Jeanne Dielman* is a paradigm of the much-desired alliance of two politics: that of feminism and that of anti-illusionism. The film frustrates co-optation by either of these discourses singly. It is the murder especially that causes the split: for the modernist film critic, this resolutely fictive scene destroys the perfect homology between literalness and fiction in the earlier domestic scenes of cooking, washing, and eating. Although downplayed dramatically, the scene effects a switch from the literal to the fictive, and intimates the absolute necessity of drama—of a fictional, narrativized closure.

Claiming this necessity as political, many feminist critics see this break with literalness purely in terms of content. The orgasm and murder become the point at which the film attains rhetorical clarity.[15] But this precision, a feature of Akerman's work, needs to be considered carefully: it is too easy to make her films seem to accommodate the kind of feminist agenda typified by essentialist catch phrases that overpsychologize both character and spectator. In this sort of reading, Jeanne is seen as suddenly becoming aware of her position in patriarchal society,[16] while the viewer, with "voyeuristic fascination," witnesses "the mother's unwilling eroticization and violent destruction of the surrogate father, her third client."[17]

Actually, as we shall see, the privileged status of Akerman's work in feminist film criticism only accentuates the weaknesses of a mechanical inference of politics from her formal practices.

Many critics have argued that Akerman radically reshapes our ways of seeing. Perhaps one of the most interesting effects her work provokes in these critics (myself included) is a temptation to reproduce her descriptiveness: in an early article on *Jeanne Dielman,* for example, Janet Bergstrom writes of a desire to "retell the plot step by step, as if the clarity of the succession of gestures and elisions carried with it an understanding of the film's strength and its importance for feminist filmmaking."[18] Akerman's literalness defies interpretation, inviting instead a descriptive impulse resembling her own hyperrealist restructuring of appearances. Her rendering of the details of mundane activity is undoubtedly the key to *Jeanne Dielman*'s power.

The need to make this formal preoccupation a channel for politics, however, seems to provoke a reduction of critical vocabulary. Much of the writing on Akerman (with notable exceptions)[19] tends to shift from detailed textual analysis to conclusions about her work's politics that seem to come from somewhere other than the films themselves. In the more articulate criticism, this "elsewhere" is usually feminist psychoanalytic theory. In *Nothing Happens,* I try to clarify the pitfalls of such criticism.

After assessing Akerman's unique processes of display, for example, most feminist commentary lingers on the trope of the reverse shot. The "refusal to set up privileged points-of-view on the action by close-ups, cut-ins and point of view shots" is certainly an important aspect of *Jeanne Dielman*'s spectatorial address.[20] Particularly in mid-70s film criticism, the absence of reverse shots is a privileged mark of rupture in the extensive debates on classical cinematic narrative's techniques of spectator suture and identification. (In an inverse way, however, this privileging credits the priority of classical cinema.)[21] In film criticism's mechanistic appropriation of the psychoanalytic concept of suture, the reverse shot became the formal means with which to bind the spectator's imaginary into the film's diegesis. Hence *Jeanne Dielman*'s refusal to "present us with the security of the reverse shot of classical representation"[22] was considered pivotal in guaranteeing the "separateness of logics" of "two modes of the feminine: the feminine manquée, acculturated under patriarchy (the character), and the feminist (the director) who is actively looking at the objective conditions of her oppression—her place in the family."[23]

The oblique address of the audience is indeed the most important effect

of the absence of reverse shots; but these conclusions seem to omit a more detailed analysis of what one does see and how one sees it. What are the effects of an uninterrupted monologue, or of an extended take? And how, indeed, do these effects relate to feminism? *Nothing Happens* answers these questions through detailed analyses of Akerman's films. It demonstrates how Akerman's combination of minimalism and hyperrealism inflects her take on women and the everyday, and it strongly qualifies the hitherto unproblematized linkage of feminism and anti-illusionism in discussions of Akerman's contribution.

In a commendable attempt to restore to the feminist pantheon works whose feminist qualities were repressed when they were co-opted by other critical tendencies, B. Ruby Rich rejects the various readings of *Jeanne Dielman*'s feminism as a subsidiary effect.[24] Through a renaming maneuver, she rejects the adjective "hyperrealist" for the film—first, because of the term's relation to "the tradition of cinematic realism," which "has never included women in its alleged veracity"; and second, because "the comparison with superrealist (or hyperrealist) paintings obscures the contradiction between their illusionism and Akerman's anti-illusionism."[25] Rich's cleansing operation also rejects the qualifier "ethnographic" for Akerman's work, since that name designates "a cinema of clinical observation aimed at objectivity and noninvolvement," while Akerman obviously intends an engagement between Jeanne and the female spectator.[26] Having refused the hyperrealist and ethnographic labels, Rich concludes that Akerman's "invention of new codes of non-voyeuristic vision" has gone unnamed.[27]

My disagreement with this epithet purge has to do with the nature of Rich's protectionism. First, no formal strategy can be essentially feminist, anti-illusionist, or political. Second, the retreat from those classifications doesn't necessarily help us understand Akerman's formal and political integrity. There is no doubt, for example, that Akerman's work is, broadly speaking, anti-illusionist; her use of extended duration, provoking a radical separateness of actor, camera, and spectator, clearly departs from the transparency of classical realism according to the Hollywood formula. But given the hyperbolic quality of Akerman's referentiality, her work doesn't need to be defended from being co-opted by realism. On the contrary, the alienating force of the work's hyperrealism is enough to place it alongside other progressive currents of realist cinema. And the term "hyperrealism," at the same time that it inscribes Akerman's work within the history of cinematic realism, also qualifies its relation to that history. Similarly, the

comparison of Akerman to an ethnographer is not to be discarded, for an understanding of the ethnographer's ideas of objectivity and distance enriches her work.[28]

To counter the panic in seeing names appropriated by "the enemy," I suggest a historicization of Akerman's relation to these terms. In chapter 1, for example, I investigate Akerman's relation to ethnographic practices, showing how, as her cinema questions realist representation, it thoroughly recasts such notions as visual anthropology's ideal of a fixed camera's record of everything that occurs at a particular site. Akerman's work forces a series of questions: does real-time representation assure a truthful record? How is one to interpret its differing effects in different bodies of work—the projects of Warhol, Colin Young, and Akerman herself, say? Does the degree of detail in her depiction of a fictional housewife achieve a representative value equivalent to that of a documentary film's record of a parade of actual housewives? If Akerman's hyperrealism is in some respects a *simulacrum* of objectivity, does her cinema force a revision of the very terminology that seems so adequately to name a different cinema?

*Nothing Happens* sets Akerman's work on an epistemological plane that intersects, but is not restricted to, that of feminist theory and practice. An underlying agenda of the book, for example, is to problematize the worn-out opposition between realism and modernism in cinema. Feminism's early '70s concern for a particularized body, I argue, gives Akerman's cinema a realist, representational impetus; her minimal hyperrealism can be inscribed, then, within the history of progressive social realism. To further rehabilitate representational cinema, and elucidate its compatibility with modernism, I question the traditional alignment of modernist cinema with the politics of anti-illusionism.

When I first came to write about *Jeanne Dielman,* it struck me that André Bazin's description of Italian neorealism, in particular of *Umberto D's* episodic narrative, could be applied almost word for word to Akerman's film. What Bazin calls a true cinema of duration has in fact been radically reconsidered twice: once with Warhol, a second time with Akerman.[29] To address the import and specificity of Akerman's minimalist treatment of a woman's everyday routine through real-time shots, chapter 1 of *Nothing Happens* establishes the different cultural and historical determinants that shaped other filmmakers' treatment of banality and description. This interest in recording phenomena ranges from a voracious totalist impulse to render all of reality visible (in neorealism, observational cinema, etc.) to a selective refiguration of visibility. With Warhol's cinema this refiguration goes beyond the positivism of practices like neorealism, cinema ve-

rité, direct cinema, and observational cinema to engage the spectator's body, inaugurating what I call a "corporeal cinema." Warhol's antiromantic stance toward representation, and the ambivalence that infects his images through his programmatic lack of distinction between original and reproduction, place his work in a postmodern ethos.

Chapter 1 also discusses how, in some directors' hands, the everyday is associated with a descriptive impulse that supposes no gaps within the filmic texture. This "realism of surfaces," advocated by Bazin, Cesare Zavattini, Roberto Rossellini, and others, I place in the context of the mid-1940s and 1950s association between phenomenology and existentialism. "To see rather than to explain" is the implicit motto of this analogical realism. Later, this confidence in the photographic record is countered (but not necessarily superseded) by a structuralist emphasis on language and a systematic suspicion of referentiality, a position represented by Jean-Luc Godard's anti-illusionist cinema, by Henri Lefebvre's sociological inquiries into the commodification of the everyday, and by Roland Barthes's semiological investigations into the myths of the photographic image. This second take on the referent—a "realism of ideas"—corresponds to the textualization of reality exemplified in structuralism and the *Annales* school of the '50s and '60s.

From this sketchy history of cinema's concern with the everyday and with duration, *Nothing Happens* selects two filmmakers particularly relevant to a discussion of Akerman's work: Warhol and Godard. Throughout this book, these directors' differing strategies signal two aesthetic alternatives within a cinematic evaluation of referentiality. Furthermore, their films from the early and mid '60s are paradigmatic of the concern to link the mundane with the political. On the one hand, Godard asserts a complex equality of major and minor themes, according political relevance to both through a mélange of French urban everydayness and a disarticulation of the Hollywood-style narrative. On the other, Warhol's films use extended duration to establish an equality between representation and reality. Through a uniform texture and a fixed stare at a single event or object, they drain out "meaning," promoting indifferentiation as a political and formal strategy.

At the core of Godard's and Warhol's subversive gestures is a dismantling of the idea of hierarchy—a general refusal to differentiate among styles, genres, themes, etc. Distinctions between "low" and "high" style become meaningless. This deconstruction ensues from the filmmakers' strategies of representation, which are indebted respectively to pop art and to hyperrealism. In art, the first gesture of this kind was surely contained

in Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, which Warhol's serial silk screens extend, injecting representation with sameness and banality. Akerman's work, on the other hand, gains its force from its hyperrealist understanding of the lack of distinction between image and reality (see chapters 2 and 3), as well as from the specific banality—that of a woman's quotidian—that it chooses to transfigure.

Akerman's exaggerated focus on the representational aspect of film gives her work a polemical relation to Godardian anti-illusionist cinema, with its conceptual and self-referential aspects, right from the start. After the severe indictment of figuration in experimental film of the '60s and early '70s, Akerman's work came in the context of a return, with a vengeance, to referentiality. Her hyperrealist cinema challenges the primacy modernism accorded to language. Moreover, the wavering between literal and figurative registers effected by duration in *News from Home* (1976), *Jeanne Dielman, D'Est* (From the East, 1993), and other films creates a spectatorial engagement radically distinct from the Godardian direct address.

The abstraction of Akerman's work—the disjunction between text and image in *News from Home* and the first part of *Je tu il elle* (I you he she, 1974), the systematic framing in *Jeanne Dielman*, the compositional symmetry in all of the films, the serial structure of *Toute une nuit* (All Night Long, 1982) and *D'Est*—contrasts with the filmmaker's precise, phenomenological recording of information. The minute gestural shifts in the behavior of Jeanne, Anna in *Meetings with Anna* (1978), and Akerman herself in *Je tu il elle;* the faces and corridors in *Hotel Monterey;* the clothes, crossroads and people's ways of lining up in *D'Est*—all suggest definite cultural and social contexts. Within the minimalist mise-en-scène and under the camera's fixed stare, specific profilmic elements become heightened foci: the sound of footsteps, soapsuds, a reddish wrapping paper. The effect is more than a feeling of formal estrangement: the sharpened materiality of cinematic elements such as light, pattern, and color suggests the "existential" materiality of a character's environment. In short, the strategies of defamiliarization that make Akerman's work an anti-illusionist metacinema are best understood as instruments of referential focus.[30]

This focus is of course qualified: Akerman's hyperrealist images and minimalist seriality promote a referential instability that is a sure mark of a poststructuralist practice. Yet Akerman's hyperrealism needs to be distinguished from the demise of referential truth effected in postmodernist art through procedures of citation and *mise-en-abîme.* Her hyperbolic referentiality precludes the kind of questioning of language that is apparent in both cinematic modernism (where it has a moral tone) and postmodern-

ism (where it has a cynical one). Rather than depending on quotations and allusions, or invoking the endless recession of the frame, Akerman's cinema operates in the borderline of the cliché. By insisting on the banal—both "natural" and textual—it elicits a new content.

It is true that Akerman's hyperrealism invokes a deconstructive stance in terms of narrative. As *Jeanne Dielman* simulates the causality so often addressed in a certain politicized feminist rhetoric, for instance, it accumulates the qualities of a domestic melodrama. Despite such simulacral effects, however, Akerman's hyperrealism is not wasted on the myths of representational origins, nor are the references it mobilizes neutralized in a game of endless relativity. Instead, her cinema steers its referential directions toward an alternate representation. Much like Warhol's not-so-indifferent in-differentiation (in his series of silk screens on disasters as much as in his mortification of commodified personalities), Akerman's decentering tactics foreground a legible and significant content. At the same time, the films don't make "truth" a theme in the way that anti-illusionistic practices inherently must.

A more nuanced view of the relations between realism and modernism necessarily involves a distinction between antinaturalism and anti-illusionism. In chapter 2, then, I explore the artistic background for Akerman's post-Godardian sensibility and minimal/hyperrealist aesthetics. Akerman's use of real time and her detailed visuality are related to art movements such as minimalism and photorealism (superrealism, hyperrealism). In cinema, they connect to Warhol's work, and to structural minimalism.

Akerman's affiliation with a nondidactic strand of European modernist realist cinema establishes the contours of an *aesthetics of homogeneity.* Characterized by a hyperbolic privileging of linearity, Renaissance perspective, and a homogeneous texture, this second-degree realism appears in the work of, among others, Robert Bresson, Eric Rohmer, and Rossellini (in his historical films). These directors' films may incorporate novels, plays, and documents within their diegeses, and I discuss these processes of layering as an alternative to the *aesthetics of heterogeneity* represented in the cinema of Godard and Yvonne Rainer.

One of the main effects of the aesthetic of homogeneity is the equation of different cinematic registers within an apparently uniform texture. A detailed discussion of *Jeanne Dielman* in chapter 3 shows how the film's equivalent representations of both dramatic and nondramatic events (of a necessarily fictive scene—a murder—and everyday chores such as cooking or washing dishes) not only constitute Akerman's main subversion here,

but attain a surplus inadequately accounted for in the feminist critique. My analysis of the links between these defamiliarizing techniques and *Jeanne Dielman*'s theme of obsessive compulsion questions reductive, content-oriented readings of Akerman's film—those "murder-of-the-man-as-the-elimination-of-patriarchal-repression"[31] readings, which at root honor the idea of a single, cause-and-effect master plot.

In *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman isn't trying to supply a transparent, accurate representation of a fixed social reality. Inscribed in the layered processes of her hyperrealist style is evidence that, for example, the housewife-prostitute Jeanne is a construct, with multiple historical, social, and cinematic resonances. Akerman's work, I suggest, is an engaged variety of realist representation, a historically grounded form that is, in the best tradition of feminism, an "irritant" to fixed categories of "woman."[32] It is in this spirit that she has expressed her distance from an essentialist feminism: "I think it is poor and limiting to think of my films as simply feminist. You wouldn't say of a Fellini film that it's a *male* film. . . . When people say there is a feminist film language, it is like saying there is only *one* way for women to express themselves."[33] In another interview she stated: "I won't say I'm a feminist film-maker. . . . I am not making women's films. I'm making Chantal Akerman's films."[34] This confession of auteurism is to be seen in the light of early feminist criticism's frequent deflation of individualism to promote the collective.[35] Akerman flatly rejects such generic discourse, and its modes of the "universal" and the "exemplary." Her refusal of the role of "feminist filmmaker" indicates an acute awareness of the "project of a transhistorical and transcultural feminist aesthetics of the cinema,"[36] and a resistance to being made its exemplar.

Akerman's resistance to neatly fitting "natural" (female, lesbian) or programmatic (feminist) categories is part of a cultural history that provided a theoretical alternative to the corrective impulse inherent in cinema's earlier essentialist realism. One manifestation of this history particularly helps to contextualize Akerman's formal politics: the debates about representing the underrepresented, specifically women, that grew out of the convergence of feminism and the French and the American New History of the early '70s. These debates, centering on the issue of representativeness, allow us to understand how Akerman stands in relation to a generic feminist program.

My discussion of this debate must confine itself to a few European developments tangential to Akerman's feminist perspective. The *Annales* school's historiographic concern for the minor, studies of power by Michel

Foucault and by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the feminist pressure for inclusiveness, and the attempt both to define the feminine and to escape such definitions—these are some of the elements in an argument that is neither linear nor total. The reduced scope of my discussion in no way reflects the complexity of the '60s and '70s' philosophical and historiographical arguments on social representativeness. It may suggest, in fact, the urgent need to theorize and historicize anti-essentialist, politicized visions in cinema, a project addressed in the British theoretical journal *m/f* and by the social and film theorists quoted here. My analysis of Akerman's films, I hope, is a contribution to this discussion.

The French historian Arlette Farge has discussed how, in the late '60s, "women's history" "joins forces with the history of mentalities and anthropology" in their common attention to the neglected, their constitution of "historical subjects" out of "figures hidden from history."[37] The feminist awareness of how women's visibility had been suppressed was transferred to the New History as a sort of political amendment. Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, for instance, acknowledge that it was no coincidence that the new microhistory "often chose as its object of study the themes of the private, the personal, the lived, those same themes that the feminist movement so strongly privileges . . . because women are undoubtedly the group that paid the greatest price for men's history."[38] In this same rectifying perspective, Farge both recognizes that feminism and the *Annales* school share a program and indicts the school's near-total failure to address "the questions that were elsewhere being asked about women." The "distance of *Annales* with respect to such intellectual and ideological effervescence," she claims, "is consistent with its general stance: it has always preferred methodological innovation to militant engagement."[39]

The New History's methodological innovations, however (as much as its thematic agenda), are hardly antithetical to militant engagement; indeed they are basic to an anti-essentialist feminist history.[40] As they mobilized economic, social, geographic, intellectual, material, and other criteria to read the past, the *annalistes* were constantly reminded of the different temporalities of the phenomena that make human history.[41] In its utter suspicion of a positivist, factual history, the school was able to map new realities in the gray areas left by the available record. Its search for a more complete, more thorough history led it to consider the vested interests obscurely revealed in the historical data, the social and power structures that at given points produce certain discursive realities and not others. This "corrective" disposition might be summed up in the deliberate use of the plural in the title of the *Annales* school journal since 1946: *Annales,*

*Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*—according to Jacques Le Goff, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch always insisted, " 'First the plural, men, not Man'—this abstraction."[42]

The variant of gender was incorporated later, as a consequence of feminist pressure. But in this corrective program's next logical step, gender itself was also questioned. Developments in feminist studies in the '80s proposed the incorporation of other identity variables, such as race and class, as an antidote to the suspicious category "women," which came to be seen as a euphemism for "Western middle-class white females." On the other hand, as Denise Riley warns, if all these differences come to rest on an unquestioned, ahistorical category of "women," one misses perceiving that "the history of feminism has also been a struggle against overzealous identifications."[43]

The corrective attempt to measure the achievements of women's history usually supposes the possibility of a transparent description of a woman's a priori reality. Joan Copjec suggests how one might avoid this approach: "The oppressive notion of 'woman's oppression' . . . is replaced by detailed descriptions of the practices that bring a particular category of woman into being, exclude her, make her visible, invisible, valuable, redundant, dangerous, etc." Copjec points to the alternative proposed by the feminist journal *m/f*: "Dreaming [of a total revolution] is replaced by intervening—one by one—in practices that can only limit power, never totally deny it."[44] When the category "women" is "referred to the more substantial realms of discursive historical formation,"[45] when intervention is limited to the sites and activities specific to a particular person's life and work,[46] then it becomes possible to envision a nontotalizing revolutionary praxis.

This new way of thinking the permeability of social and individual, of theory and practice, is traceable to the experience of 1968.[47] It is with the daily grassroots-level struggles of that time, and with the demise of the notion of a representative consciousness, that the need to analyze the pervasive mechanics of power is acknowledged. Intellectuals, "agents of consciousness," are revealed as complicit with the very power they claim to negate in others' names. The "universal intellectual" who embraced the "universal cause of the proletariat" is summarily dismissed. Instead, the intellectual must "fight against the forms of power there where one is at once the object and instrument."[48]

Foucault did much to theorize the new micropolitics, arguing that the dissemination of power through all spheres of life and discourse means

forgoing the notion of a controlling social power. It also means that practices understood as politically neutral and without interest in fact share in the status quo and must be considered active. For Foucault, power is not limited to the "evils of commodification." Although his writings constitute a radical attack on humanism, they have had a salutary effect in activating a sense of individual responsibility in social affairs. To acknowledge personal politics as no less a forum of the struggle for power than an international trade battle demands the dissolution of the comfortable split between "we the victims" and "they the power."

Catherine Gallagher's essay "Marxism and the New Historicism" fleshes out the links between the New Left, the *Annales* school, Foucault, and feminism to expose another important nerve in the question of realism in cinema: the notion of representativeness. Akerman's approach to type takes this issue to task. The relations between personal or private and collective or public interests become singularly important in cultural or political activities that claim to represent "true" reality, as do the feminist enterprises in historiography, media, and everyday life.

Akerman's understanding of the representational links between private and public adds an important twist to the feminist motto "The personal is political." Her interest in the minor is not restricted merely to representing it; her project may show traces of feminism's well-intentioned corrective realism but cannot be reduced to it. Indeed the term "minor" can be applied to her aesthetic in the same way as it is to Kafka's (and Beckett's) in Deleuze and Guattari's book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.[49] Akerman recognizes some of her own formal preoccupations in the qualities Deleuze and Guattari locate in Kafka: the dryness of language, the lack of metaphoric association, the composition in a series of discontinuous blocks, the interest in putting a poor, withered syntax and a reduced vocabulary at the service of a new intensity. She too is interested in deterritorializing culture, in a minor use of a major language, in the collective aspect any minority expression attains.[50]

Akerman exemplifies the minor through the letters sent by her mother and read aloud on the soundtrack of *News from Home:* "When you see the letters of a mother, like those by my mother, who is not a writer, who is not an intellectual, it is a subculture. . . . there is no place within artistic things for this kind of expression."[51] Her *Meetings with Anna* also follows Deleuze and Guattari in that she posits Anna's nomadism and celibacy as a form of freedom from both social and aesthetic norms, as a rejection of a single culture. "Since she is nomadic she is not an owner, and celibate she

can either be related to others or be alone. Being alone, outside any system, belonging already to another world," Anna represents "a way of being ahead of her time that prepares our future, a sort of mutant."[52]

Deleuze and Guattari use women in a quasi-metaphoric way, suggesting the "becoming-woman" as a process of liminal identity. Akerman cannot privilege quite the same process of multiple deterritorializations (Gregor Samsa's "becoming-animal" in *Metamorphosis,* for example, involves a simultaneous movement away from the fixed identities of both man and animal),[53] in the face of the feminist demand for placement and the exercise of identity, a borderline status may be an undesirable position. But Akerman seems to feel that her politics of the singular are perfectly described through Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialization and minor literature. Her work exhibits not only the formal qualities they find in Kafka but the same sense that formal concerns are indissociable from the articulation of a new content. *Nothing Happens* considers the alternate conception of the subject that this new content/form involves.

Akerman has several times quoted Deleuze and Guattari on how, in a minor literature, the characters assume an immediate, nonhierarchical relation between small individual matters and economic, commercial, juridical, and political ones.[54] One needs to examine how Akerman's desire to represent an individual as *immediately* traversed by politics and history matches her intuitive refusal to embrace a "raised fists" kind of feminism.[55] Let us briefly trace the relevance of Akerman's insistence on her difference from feminism to feminist representation. The indissociability of the social and the individual would seem at first to be at the very base of a familiar feminist rhetoric. Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson convincingly argue against a surface analogy.[56] In "The 'Subject' of Feminism," they suggest how the prevalent feminist position is in fact informed by the opposite notion—that of the *separateness* of the social and the individual.[57] Adams and Minson show how this notion leads to the idea of a purposive, "interested" individual, that is deeply complicitous with an essentialist vision of women (and of the subject). And "whether the subject is conceived as *author* or *effect* [of a realm of values] matters little," for "the presupposition of male 'values,' 'power' and 'interests' . . . merely takes social forms as the theater in which already known effects are played out."[58]

Akerman engages the implicit moralism of such "theaters" in formal terms. To the extent that her characters rehearse a novel relation between the social and individual, her writing of them reflects precise historical and cultural pressures: both the feminist demand for identity and the

simultaneous post-'68 suspicion of master narratives, of totalizing explanations and systems. Clearly indebted to feminism, Akerman's formal politics just as significantly arise from an intellectual position that refuses to claim the authority to speak for others.[59] Her "mutant being" is colored with the '70s' distinctive mistrust of universal representativeness. Discussing Anna's unresponsiveness to Heinrich's account of his life after World War II in *Meetings with Anna,* for example, Akerman states, "She listens to his speech in its difference, its strangeness. She would seem much more humane if she had made any gesture to efface, reabsorb the difference."[60] Akerman's care not to efface difference is promoted through a peculiar form of address: the use of "talk blocks," dialogues so distended that they work as monologues. The respondent's silence and the lack of reverse shots displace the reaction onto the audience.

In addition to this oblique address of the viewer, Akerman avoids the pitfalls of totalizing representation by making her characters present gendered, individual singularities in tension with an implied category, a collective entity. This tension lies at the basis of her representation of type. The subject of type has been neglected in film studies, but the analysis of how an individual assumes a collective identity is crucial to understanding the sociopolitical thrust of modern realist film. The nature of a film's protagonists is one of the work's most socially telling aspects.

Akerman's protagonists have qualities with precise cultural and historical meanings. Although their behavior is conveyed by very stylized techniques, they consistently invite psychological decoding, as though their singularity were amenable to correction, or at least to diagnosis. Yet they are not meant as clear, positive examples; they undermine the "universal" representations, the generic types, found elsewhere in cinema. *Jeanne Dielman,* for example, short-circuits a paradigmatic representation of domestic work, just as *Je tu il elle* does of lesbian lovemaking. The eccentricity of the exceptional, "strange" protagonists in *Meetings with Anna, Jeanne Dielman,* and *Je tu il elle* has a clear function: their peculiar behavior challenges the notions of generic type that would corroborate an essentialist vision.

Akerman's tilt toward the pathological in constructing her characters is a tactical move, then, a matter of expressing a different relation between the private and the collective. Alongside her films' stylistic clarity and formal coherence, her characters' compulsive behavior is unsettling in its irreducible difference. Their pathologies are her way of avoiding generic attributions. Anna, Chantal/Julie, and Jeanne assume a liminal status, a nonfixed identity, their contact with or friction against spaces or other

performers creating transformative dissonances. Modernist cinema tends to try to void its characters of their individual psychologies; Akerman's characters, I argue, go beyond the neutralization of individuality present in constructions of allegorical or "average" types. The question underlying her novel conceptions is that of creating a potentially plural representation that nevertheless does not attempt a totalized status.

In chapter 4 I explore how films that distance themselves from the essentialism of the feminist documentaries of the early '70s deal with feminism's enduring demands that they represent the collective. An example of the more theoretically inclined phase of feminist filmmaking is the work of Yvonne Rainer, whose attempt to short-circuit the personal I relate to theories of the subject deriving from deconstruction and Lacanian theory. Akerman's *Je tu il elle,* on the other hand, responds to the issue of representativeness by creating a purposeful indeterminacy in relation not only to the positions of character, author, and director but to that of a fixed sexual identity. Performed by the director, the film's protagonist condenses several functions within a single body, generating an instability of address and a truly decentered identity—an "a-individual" type.

Chapter 5 compares the notion of type in Akerman's cinema to the modernist fragmentation that frames Juliette/Vlady/Her in Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her.* Godard makes the housewife/prostitute the basis for a semiological and moral questioning of "naturalness"; Akerman presents the same figure in a more complex light, piling up layers of signification that include but are not restricted to the feminist reading. *Nothing Happens* discusses how this duality of registers is inscribed in Akerman's hyperrealist characters and mise-en-scène, and how her style partakes formally in a suspicion of master narratives.

Avoiding back-and-forth dialogue, Akerman's films taint the conventions of naturalism by problematizing one of its ingrained assumptions: that the characters will mediate between text and spectator. Chapter 6 discusses the monotone quality, the use of platitudes, and the oblique address of the audience in Akerman's verbal texts. *Jeanne Dielman, Meetings with Anna, News from Home,* and *Je tu il elle* combine different modes of address: letters, monologues, descriptions, storytelling. In Akerman's texts, tone and rhythm intensify at the expense of content. This chapter also investigates how Akerman deals with issues of signature and authorship in the made-for-TV *Man with the Suitcase* (1983), the video *Filmmaker's Letter* (1984), the respective postscripts to *Meetings with Anna* and *News from Home.* My discussion is intended to clarify how self-presentation can be inflected by the supposition of a diffuse, generic au-

dience, and how Akerman problematizes authorship by the use of her own physical presence.

Chapter 7 takes the issue of type in another direction, investigating whether the use of multiple characters, story lines, performers, and scenes in Akerman's later films generates or precludes the formation of statistical, sociological categories. I explore Akerman's antitotalist bent through a study of her use of cycle, repetition, and cliché in *Toute une nuit, Un Jour Pina a demandé* (1983), *Histoires d'Amériques* (American stories/Food, family, and philosophy, 1988), *Night and Day* (1991), *The Eighties* (1983), *Window Shopping* (1986), *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (I'm hungry, I'm cold, 1984), and *D'Est.* And I relate her use of seriality to filmic modes with more totalizing ambitions—to ethnographic film, to the "city symphony" genre, to experimental road movies. Akerman's use of fragmentation and cliché (pop songs, soap opera structure) in her musical films appears here as part of a dialogue with postmodernist aesthetics.

I conclude with a discussion of Akerman's theme of the impossible choice, in her short film *Le Déménagement* (Moving in, 1992). In *Night and Day,* Akerman suggests the possibility of circumventing the natural cycle (day followed by night), as well as the choice of a lover: Julie, who goes from one lover by day to another at night, does not sleep. The film's outcome supposes a form of personal victory for her—a nomadic, nonattached way of life. But what the film makes even clearer is how this construction of a deterritorialized life depends on the alogical formulations of Akerman's dialogues. My discussion of *Le Déménagement*'s verbal conundrums furthers an understanding of how the protagonist's rejection of choice reflects Akerman's formal liminality.

Akerman's extended takes, radical ellipses, dialogue-qua-monologues, compressed actions, and abrupt cuts are no formal play. Her stylized, concrete mise-en-scènes defy ideal figurations. Akerman delimits scene and obscene not only in her choices of what to elide and what to represent, but in her insistence on the materiality of her performers. As I shall demonstrate, it is the stylized quality of her representations and her exaggerated focus on material bodies—both cinematic (sound, texture) and physical (the performers)—that defines her *corporeal cinema* and her particular status in the realist-modernist paradigm that *Nothing Happens* sets up.

Godard once provoked Akerman by saying that while she always referred to her filmmaking in terms of inscription and writing, he used terms more appropriate to cinema and photography, such as "develop," "show," and "record." Akerman's answer is telling: "You say that there aren't im-

ages already inscribed and I say that yes there are images already in-
scribed, and it is exactly *under* those that I work: over the inscribed image
and the one I would love to inscribe."[61] *Nothing Happens* traces the shift
from showing to inscribing—from the recording impulse of neorealist aes-
thetics to the subversive energy of Warhol's minimal/hyperrealist produc-
tion of simulacra. Godard's modernist phenomenology is undoubtedly an
important link in this shift, which reflects a move away from a belief in the
anteriority of reality, a move toward representation. Indeed one need only
think of Godard's fascination with Henry Fonda's face in Hitchcock's *The
Wrong Man* in the '50s, and of his pop sensibility in *Breathless* and *Alpha-
ville* in the '60s, to note the cultural and historical shift that in the late '60s
and '70s would lead to Akerman's and a few others' corporeal cinemas,
where the neorealists' or direct cinema's romantic investment in reality
is intercepted by the ineluctable knowledge of film's representational
nature.

This double-layered cinema allows only inscription. It is not an idealist
cinema; though utterly ascetic, it prizes materiality. In this cinema, in fact,
the quality of presence wavers precisely *because* of its materiality, because
of the excess produced in it by hyperbole and redundance. The radical
figuration of this excess is the American experiment with real-time repre-
sentation: Warhol's films are the signpost to a *corporeal cinema* in which
the concreteness of both the filmic body and the bodies represented eludes
the very Idea of Materiality. At the same time that text is perverted by tone,
and that gesture is doubled by dialogue, the works of Rohmer, Dreyer,
Bresson, and Akerman create an extramateriality, a surplus I call, for lack
of a better term, "theatricality." The term emphasizes that this cinema
works its principal effect on the ever fragile link between artifice and
nature—the figure and body of the performer.

Akerman's contribution to this antinaturalistic corporeal cinema in-
volves the blunt, unavoidable acknowledgment of a gendered body. A
woman's gestures are simultaneously recognized and made strange. Our
attention turns to a different pace, a different rhythm, and it remains for us
to determine where this distinction lies. It is finally the dry intensity of
bodies traversed by the mechanisms of cinema that moves me, and moves
me toward the singularity proposed by Chantal Akerman's films.

# 1  NOTHING HAPPENS

## Time for the Everyday in Postwar

## Realist Cinema

*Thus the most realistic of the arts shares the common lot . . . reality must inevitably elude it at some point.*—André Bazin[1]

*The everyday is platitude, . . . but this banality is also what is most important. It brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived . . . it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity.*—Maurice Blanchot[2]

"Nothing happens": this definition of the everyday is often appended to films and literature in which the representation's substratum of content seems at variance with the duration accorded it. Too much celluloid, too many words, too much time, is devoted to "nothing of interest." The precariousness of this extremely relative definition is more than a matter of taste. If the word "boring" has little critical value, after World War II the phrase "Nothing happens" becomes increasingly charged with a substantive, polemical valence.

In the immediate postwar period in Europe, as social reality became a concrete experience of subsistence (as opposed to the more immediate life-or-death concerns of the war years), the everyday seemed a more-than-worthy subject. The quotidian of De Sica's or of Zavattini's neorealism, characterized by the discovery of heroism in anonymous, urban, lower-middle-class and white-collar protagonists, is, however, quite different from the quotidian of Rossellini's Louis XIV. And it also differs from the

quotidian distilled from the answers to the loaded existentialist query, "How happy are you with your life?"—the question that Rouch and Edgar Morin ask in the series of interviews in their *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960). My interest is in the way some filmmakers negotiate the link between the banal or quotidian and the political, and in the shifts in discursive ground that allow for such different approaches to everyday life. Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, of course, figures as a major text in any consideration of the modernist approach to the quotidian. The label "Nothing happens," often applied to Akerman's work, is key in defining that work's specificity—its equation of extension and intensity, of description and drama.

The inscription of subject matter neglected in traditional film tends to involve a corrective thrust, a setting straight of the image bank: if conventional cinema contains too few positive images of women and ethnic or other minority groups, it becomes the realist filmmaker's task to represent these groups. The inclusion of such "images between images" begets a spatio-temporal, as well as moral expansion of cinema.

The interest in extending the representation of reality reflects a desire to restore a phenomenological integrity to reality, or to dig up some covert causal or psychological motivational structure. Haunting the interest in a repressed or unrepresented reality is the idea of a hidden totality. It seems intrinsic to the "corrective thrust" of realism, then, that the effort should fall prey to a form of essentialism. Realist films entail more than a "documentary" record of reality; as we analyze them, it becomes clear that they seek adequacy in two main functions: first, to act as visual, aural analogies with perceptual reality, and second, to fulfill a notion of representativeness.

This second notion (addressed in my discussion of type in chapters 4 and 5) relates most directly to the prescription that any event or character presented will have a social dimension. The requirement complicates matters interestingly in confronting the inevitable reduction implicit in any filmic representation: how is one to represent a general idea, collectivity, or moral through the always indexical and particularizing powers of image and sound? This question (theoretically and practically addressed by Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and expressionist and *cinema nôvo* filmmakers, among others) becomes especially pertinent when the director wants to avoid making association and symbolic leaps, and to fend off an impulse toward allegory—as in, for example, the version of realism represented by neorealism, and in the films of Warhol and those of Akerman. What is of interest for us here is the way that a consideration of the

"images between images" can shape a transformative realism as well as an alternate notion of type, invalidating the essentialist question of a reality prior to representation.

The emphasis on dramatic equivalence between major and minor events that Bazin finds in neorealism[3] directly recalls the formal structure of *Jeanne Dielman*. Given the obvious disparities between films such as *Umberto D* (1950), organized by the conventions of analytic editing, and *Jeanne Dielman,* which resolutely avoids point-of-view structuring, one has to account for the particularities of contexts ('50s humanism and '70s micropolitics, for example) and styles (social melodrama and minimalist narrative) that set these dedramatized cinemas apart. While both projects equate the mundane and the dramatic, they can easily serve radically different agendas.

Typical of neorealist attention to the marginal discourse is a certain idealism. In *Jeanne Dielman,* Akerman disables romantic connotations by giving to the mundane its proper, and heavy, weight and by channeling the disturbing effect of a minimal-hyperrealist style into a narrative with definite political resonances. Her attention to a subject matter of social interest is literal—fixed frame, extended take—and so stylized as almost to be stilted. In this way, she denotes the idea of display itself; her cinema focuses hyperbolically on what Cesare Zavattini claimed as the main requirement of neorealist cinema—"social attention."[4] Indeed, in *Jeanne Dielman* this focus is quite extreme. Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Godard, Roberto Rossellini, and Jean-Marie Straub and Daniélle Huillet, among others, have all interpreted the demand for "social attention" as interchangeable with a temporal filmic focus on a single scene, situation, problem;[5] but the relentless frontality of Akerman's display of "social attention" still surprises.

Along with extended duration the quotidian is undoubtedly the signifier par excellence of the realistic impulse. The possibility of covering the events evoked by the notion of the quotidian is, as we shall see, the main lure for the realist desire. Indeed, with various different emphases, what marks the anti-idealist move in postwar culture is the privileging of everyday life. The accent on the everyday—on nonspecialized labor, private life, unstructured or extrainstitutional activity or thought—as well as on the underlying materiality and concreteness of cinematic elements, provides the traditional conjunction of modernism, realism, and politics.

In the period between neorealism and Akerman's films, the intrusion of extraneous elements, or of a different tempo (when the minor event receives an attention involving expanded duration), was shaped as a reality

surplus, a reality effect. In the films of this period, a number of strategies clearly function to make the everyday and material reality the signifier of the Real: the temporal equality accorded both significant and insignificant events; the programmatic foregrounding of materiality and visual concreteness (Robert Bresson, Straub and Huillet, Akerman); the use of amateur actors (De Sica, Zavattini, Jean Rouch, Rossellini); the reenactment of one's own experience (Zavattini, Antonioni, Rouch); and the use of real, literal time to depict events (Warhol, Akerman). That the quotidian generally resists direct representation in conventional cinema allows it to promise a "reserve" available to the realistic impulse. This reserve is precisely what realist cinema's various attempts at literalness or verisimilitude offer. As Maurice Blanchot writes, at first, the quotidian is defined in the negative, as, most immediately, the slice of life that is usually considered unworthy of narration. Whatever escapes denomination as some other part of life—work, leisure, etc.—confronts narration with a stubborn "stationary movement."[6] Yet this "unnamable" serves a basic function: "to participate in the diverse figures of True, . . . in the becoming of what occurs either below (economic and technical change) or above (philosophy, poetry, politics)."[7]

What interests me here is the variety of ways in which the "unnamable" concept of the quotidian attained importance between the mid '40s and the mid '70s, while accumulating different connotations, different nodules of expressiveness. *Umberto D, Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1966), and Akerman's work all chart a period in which phenomenology, existentialism, semiology, the *Annales* school, and feminism all in one way or another claimed the everyday as their object (or banner).

### Charting the Everyday in Postwar Europe

Between the mid '40s and the mid '70s, questions of social reality and the everyday took vivid cinematic forms to represent a new focus of the postwar period—the privileging of materiality, of concrete existence and of social solidarity. Those concerns were tied not only to a generic humanist feeling, but to a Marxist sensibility geared toward analyzing material conditions.

The general critical interest in foregrounding minor events and occurrences is worth examining. Henri Lefebvre was the first to instill the notion of everyday life with theoretical currency; a Marxist, Lefebvre published the first volume of his *Introduction à une critique de la vie quotidienne* in 1947.[8] *Annales* historian Fernand Braudel's "The Situation

of History in 1950" suggests, following the work of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, that history needs to go beneath the surface of political events. The analyses of a history developing in a slow-paced rhythm—the *longue durée*—as well as the careful study of the fabric of the everyday life become the material for a New History that develops into the seventies. And Bazin's writings on cinematic realism appeared during the same postwar moment, suggesting a shared interest in everyday life on the part of cultural historians, sociologists, and critics.

The quotidian in this discussion occupies a double space: it is both the utopian space of change (what Lefebvre calls the "festival") and the elusive other in need of disclosure. In its very indefinability, its dissemination in the social fabric, it is the core of revolutionary potentiality. It "emerges," Lefebvre writes, "as a sociological point of feedback with a dual character": "it is the residuum (of all the possible specific and specialized activities outside social experience) and the product of society in general; it is the point of delicate balance and that where imbalance threatens."[9] The situationist Guy Debord addresses this point "where imbalance threatens" in his "Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life," a talk he gave through a tape recorder in the "Conference of the Group for Research on Everyday Life," convened by Lefebvre in 1961. There Debord talks about the "useless, vulgar and disturbing concept of everyday life": "What makes for the difficulty of even recognizing a terrain of everyday life is not only the fact that it has already become the . . . meeting ground of an empirical sociology and a conceptual elaboration; but also the fact that it . . . happens to be the stake in any revolutionary renewal of culture and politics."[10] Perhaps it is its resistance to conceptual representation that leads everyday life to be "policed and mystified by every means," to serve as "a sort of reservation for good natives who keep modern society running without understanding it."[11]

Debord wrote these words at a time when the everyday had become the ground of a continual revolution, when to consider the concept of the everyday "would imply the necessity of an integral political judgement."[12] By May 1968, a suspicion of representation, and of any form of social representativeness, encompassed every institution, including that of art cinema. Raoul Vaneigem, for instance, a member of the Situationist International, claimed that "Godard is to film what Lefebvre or Morin are to social critique: . . . [Aragon's or Godard's collages] are nothing other than an attempt to interpret "détournement" in such a way as to bring about its recuperation by the dominant culture."[13]

Aside from a territorial controversy (as to what art can resist commodifi-

cation), what is of interest here is the role of the quotidian as a space where noninstitutionalized practices can unfold. The utopian dimension of the everyday seems to lie precisely in its resistance to institutionalization. At the same time, of course, the very attempt to frame the everyday brushes against the conventional sense of everydayness as repetitious routine. The quotidian stands, then, both for material reality and for the impossibility fully to account for it, to represent it. Hence the desire to represent materiality either concretely, by exacerbating cinematic elements, or thematically, by inscribing the signs of this reality (banal events, mundane gestures, actions irrelevant to the plot), becomes the trademark of a realist impulse.

In historicizing the interest in everyday life, Lefebvre relates how, in the period immediately after World War II, the hopes for a "second liberation"—the "social change that was to follow . . . in the footsteps of political liberation"—had miscarried: "The workers were being dispossessed of their consciousness and attempts to build a new society based on this consciousness had not succeeded."[14] Moreover, the model for a "new society" had been thrown in disrepute by the identification of Stalinist socialism with totalitarianism. During the postwar reconstruction in France, economic and social regeneration were mistakenly taken as the "building of a new society." What was actually happening was an increasing social bureaucratization, a process that included the Communist Party. Given the polarization effected by the cold war, however, Marxist intellectuals had trouble openly admitting that both Stalinist and Communist Party policies were informed by totalitarianism, and geared their energy instead toward analyzing the failure of postwar revolutionary consciousness: alienated consciousness in capitalist society. This analysis demanded a rethinking of the vesting of revolutionary energies in a working class that noticeably shared the aspirations of the bourgeoisie.

The perception of a new postwar society led intellectuals to reformulate humanism, Lefebvre writes, in a way that "did not aspire to enlist rhetoric and ideology in the cause of a reform of superstructures (Constitution, State, Government) but to 'alter existence.' "[15] It was this new humanism that animated existentialism in its more popular and widespread version, visualizing the everyday as a space of continual commitment and choice. In a way, then, the energy around the concept of the everyday was nourished by disillusionment and disappointment over the rampant institutionalization of power after the war, in the spheres of leftist politics and academia as elsewhere.

Lefebvre's revision of his inaccurate understanding of capitalism as a

localized (affecting mostly the infrastructure) rather than a widespread force went hand in hand with the emergence of critical terms geared toward capitalist society as a whole: consumer society, the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Lefebvre, 1971), the "compartmentalization of everyday life." Earlier, romantic notions of the worker as bearer of revolutionary consciousness—because closer to the sphere of non-specialized labor and therefore more prone to alienation—were gradually replaced. In a self-critique in his *Everyday Life in the Modern World,* Lefebvre remarked that "the theory of everyday life had become contaminated by a form of populism. . . . It implied both an obsession with the working classes . . . and *a philosophical obsession with the genuineness concealed within the ambiguity of experience*" (my italics).[16] To renounce the myth of the working class, and other exploited groups, as exempt from bourgeois or capitalist values was perhaps the greatest step toward the acknowledgment of, and direct confrontation with, the recuperating force of capitalist society, prompting an understanding of alienation that went far beyond the context of labor. Incorporating Hegel's notion of alienation as subjective misrecognition (minus that notion's idealist contours), critics could see alienation as implicated in the very formation of subjective consciousness.[17]

It is significant that the simultaneous efforts to redirect attention to material phenomena and to the movement of consciousness, to a worldly situation and to individual commitment and choice, had everyday life as their shared ground. It is indeed the everyday that allows for the precarious marriage of existentialism and Marxism. For both, at their most generous theoretical stretches, daily life is the arena where consciousness (class or subjective) and material reality need to be confronted. A recurring myth, however, lurks behind every new conceptualization of the everyday: that of some essential truth yet to be represented. The perceptual horizons of this myth are sketched above in the link between theories of everyday and the "philosophical obsession with the genuineness concealed within the ambiguity of experience." In slightly different arrangements these words reappear promoting the necessary affinity of cinema and phenomenology.

### A Realism of Surfaces: Bazin and Neorealist Film

In "Film and the New Psychology" (1947), Maurice Merleau-Ponty defends the idea of such an affinity by remarking on the evidence, supposedly provided by cinema, of the permeation of subject and world. As a

perceptual object, he claims, a film can be associated with Gestalt theory, because "the movies . . . directly present to us that special way of being in the world . . . which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know."[18] Later, Merleau-Ponty expands on the indissolubility of mind and body and the timeliness of Gestalt theory as a break with classical psychology. Likewise, "phenomenological or existential philosophy is largely an expression of surprise at this inherence of the self in the world and in others, . . . and an attempt to make us *see* the bond between subject and world . . . rather than to *explain* it as the classical philosophies did."[19] This argument encapsulates a recurring assumption in the realist rhetoric that persisted until Godard: the idea that description can be used to fend off conceptualization, as an access to and envisioning of the object and its inherence in the world. Merleau-Ponty's defense of the use of existential terminology in analyzing film is capped, for instance, with the phrase "because this is movie material par excellence."[20] Arguing that film is in harmony with (phenomenological or existential) philosophy, Merleau-Ponty defends a notion echoed in the writings of Rossellini, Zavattini, and Bazin, among others:[21] Zavattini, for example, states, "No other expressive medium has, as cinema, this originary and congenital capacity of photographing things that . . . deserve to be shown in their quotidianeity, meaning in their longer, truer duration; the machine . . . *sees* things and *not their concept.*"[22] The parallel between existential philosophy, phenomenology, and cinema, then, is based on their shared avoidance of being a "showcase for ideas."

Bazin, the main propounder of an ontology of realist film, expounds on depth of field as a spatial correlate of the temporality of the long take, for "it confirms the unity of actor and decor, the total interdependence of everything real."[23] As Annette Michelson points out in her introduction to Noel Burch's *Theory of Film Practice,* this privileging of the long take and of depth of field places Bazin's writings in a precise cultural and political climate: "The viewer, unguided by an assertive style, proceeds in time to apprehend the *données* of that field, by implication rehearsing through the experience of film viewing the existential situation of being-in-the-world, 'choosing in ambiguity.' "[24] Michelson's use of expressions culled from existentialism and phenomenology locates the philosophical basis of Bazin's unequivocal endorsement of ambiguity, which he proposes as a correlate of the fluidity both of perception and of reality.

Bazin's writings uphold Amedée Ayfre's statements in his article "Neorealism and Phenomenology,"[25] where he suggests that Rossellini and a few others have tried, like Husserl, to "go . . . to things themselves. . . .

their approach as filmmakers runs an opposite course to that of anal-
ysis. . . . ceasing to delve subtly into 'characters' and 'milieux' . . . and in
a sense attempting a total apprehension which is sequentially complete
like existence in time."[26] Besides endorsing Ayfre's position, the style of
Bazin's writings suggests an undecidability and an incompleteness that
parallel his privileging of ambivalence. In fact, his prose recalls the thrust
and tone of phenomenological description: the movements by which he
tracks the object delineate the problematics of objectivity without con-
fronting them,[27] a trait explored by Jacques Derrida in a fine critique of
phenomenology which clarifies the philosophical grounds of this avoid-
ance, and suggests both the benefits and the costs of the embrace of ambi-
guity. Actually, the phenomenological substratum of Bazin's writings re-
veals some of the same operations that, for Derrida, characterize Husserl's
enterprise: phenomenological description is predicated on an obfuscation
of the dichotomy between "structure" and "genesis." This unquestioned
dichotomy creates a "philosophy of essences always considered in their
objectivity, intangibility, their apriority: but, by the same token, it is a
philosophy of experience, of becoming, of the temporal flux of what is
lived which is the ultimate reference."[28] Veiled by the "serene use of these
concepts [of structure and genesis]," Derrida says, is a "debate that regu-
lates and gives its rhythm to the progression of description . . . and whose
incompleteness, which leaves every major stage of phenomenology unbal-
anced, makes new reductions and explications indefinitely necessary."[29]

This need for new reductions and explications is the supplement ani-
mating any essentialist approach to reality, and inspiring Bazin's wish for
(and deferral of) totality. His writings are characterized by a swinging
motion between, on the one hand, granting the object an a priori existence
to be unveiled by a transparent record and, on the other, continuously
deferring definition in favor of the shifting movements of perception. As
Philip Rosen notes, Bazin's "often noted belief in reality's 'ambiguity'
works, among other things, to refuse the finality of constant criteria."[30]
And this refusal allows the subject's continuing investment in "satisfying
his 'obsession with realism.' "[31]

A grasp of the ambivalent status of description in both art and philoso-
phy is crucial in understanding modern cinematic realism as well as the
rhetoric of fidelity put forth by Rosselini's statements and Bazin's writ-
ings. In nineteenth-century realism, description must reconcile classical
notions of "coherence and global organization" (aesthetic) with "the in-
fluence of non-literary theories (sociological, biological, anthropological,
etc.) that affirm that the individual is subject to dependence on his en-

vironment."[32] Speaking of Rossellini, Bazin neatly confuses these two modes of causality as if narrative merely followed the demands of reality: "It is perhaps especially the structure of the narrative which is most radically turned upside down. It *must now respect the actual duration of the event.*" [my italics][33] Bazin hesitates, then, in submitting the subversion of narrative structure to aesthetics, leaning instead toward an "anthropological causality." The critic nevertheless comes across a bothersome detail: the cut. "The cuts that logic demands," Bazin writes, "can only be, at best, descriptive."[34] Equating a disjunctive representation to a fragmentary reality, he suggests that in Rossellini's films, ellipses imply actual lacunae in reality, or in our knowledge of reality. Deftly construing a fallacious analogy between two different orders of reality, Bazin performs the classical misconstruction informing any essentialist realism. He blatantly evades the issue of language as a medium with a reality of its own.

An important variant of this essentialist realism is exemplified in the positivism of sociological practices that embraced the new technology of film for its research.[35] The gap can only exist in filmic approaches such as observational cinema if it is perceived as a direct correlate of a faltering reality. As John Marshall and Emile de Brigard claim in "Idea and Event in Urban film," "Film can follow small events closely, letting them take their own time and produce their own content. The result is a sequence notable for the lack of conceptual and contextual framework which other forms of film attempt to supply."[36] This notion of sequence filming agrees with Bazin's conception that spatio-temporal continuity can preserve the unity of an event or act. Deployed in the controversy around the issue of objectivity in collecting data, these arguments are clearly defensive in presenting film as a recording medium for the social sciences. Their rhetoric of instrumentality shows how issues of filmic continuity are subsidiary to broader questions of avoiding a "conceptual" or "contextual" interference. To Colin Young, observational cinema differs from "simple note-taking" in that "the final film *can* represent the original event or situation directly. The filming process can be as much like observation as possible."[37]

Crossing various epistemological fields (ethnography, history, sociology, etc.), the idea of the "truth of vision" in Western literate culture entails an entire set of metaphors that presuppose a process of objectivity and objectification.[38] This "truth of vision" is manifested in cinema as a positivistic faith in film's technical neutrality. This faith experienced an upsurge with the development of direct sound recording in the early '60s,

which allowed both American direct cinema and French cinema verité to assert a claim as records of reality, basing their procedures on a notion of truth as palpable, "visible" (and audible) evidence. This visualist approach extends into cinema verité's attempts to present the filmmaker's own subjectivity as concrete "image": since it is a condition of "truth" in cinema verité that the diegesis encompass the cinematic process itself, the interview situation itself may become part of the film's imagery, in image, voice, or camera axis, signaling the attempt to represent the shadow side of filmmaking—the filmmaker's own presence.[39]

The residual subjectivity muffled in verité practices appears mostly to emphasize the filmmaker's heroic hardship in getting behind the public person (in the case of direct cinema) or to the person's truth core (in verité practices).[40] The naïveté of direct cinema's fear of the spoken as actual interference—in *Nehru* (1962) Ricky Leacock verbally announces a pact of noninterference, i.e. he will not ask questions of Nehru—confirms this genre's positivistic faith in imagery. In addition, it makes clear the arena in which the authenticity of documentary is finally waged. In French cinema verité, it is the order of speech that negotiates the legitimacy of the film as relatively independent from ethical issues of interference. As subjectivity is objectified, represented as image and sound, mediation is cleansed of the guilty conscience of the documentarists. And what better place to get rid of this guilt than through a technological apparatus converted (as it privileges speech) into a confessional chamber? In addition, synchronized sound's tendency to create an alternation of statement with doubt or hesitation is seen as authenticating the fact that a presence is fully represented. As it evades editing, speech that is now fluent, now faltering circuitously confirms the contiguity of cinematic apparatus and the reality facing the camera. In a film in which hesitations and silences are left intact, the issue of authorial control is elided. Marks of interference are avoided, and the process of editing and choice is in a way bracketed. The truth of this cinema is moral and depends mostly on recording the emergence of conscience.[41]

Bazin's description of the neorealist use of ellipsis, and the emphasis in *Chronicle of a Summer* on hesitations, mistakes, and so on, are versions of this notion of a representational analogue that merely reproduces an incomplete reality, a reality still in the making.

The gap might also work, within a different aesthetic agenda, as a signifier of cinematic materiality, pointing to an explicit artistic artifice. In his analysis of Bresson's *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne,* Bazin shows the

stakes of a modern realism. In this film, Bresson amplifies sound to make it concrete and referential, a strategy Bazin reads as a stylistic choice creating an interplay of abstraction and concreteness:

> The rain, the murmur of the waterfall, the . . . hooves of the horses on the cobblestones, are not there just as a contrast to the simplification of sets . . . [or to] the literary and anachronistic flavor of the dialogue. They are not needed either for dramatic antithesis or for contrast in decor. They are there deliberately as neutrals, as foreign bodies, like a grain of sand that gets into and seizes up a piece of machinery.[42]

Bazin and Roland Barthes (in "The Reality Effect," 1968), sift with similar critical finesse through the narratives of modern realist cinema and literature, looking for the impure and concrete element that will create a gap, a rupture with conventional forms of verisimilitude. The "detail" for Barthes is the "irrelevant event," for Bazin the "grain of sand that gets into and seizes up a piece of machinery." Barthes's critical essays are turned toward exposing the illusions of referentiality; Bazin's are packed with the mounting contradictions of exposing how the real is constructed at the same time that they minimize the role of cinematic mediation. Both writers embrace ruptures and divergences from functional narrative as signs of a new, modern verisimilitude. To acknowledge the points of contact between the structural semiotician's and the realist critic's investment on referentiality, allows one to grasp more fully the nuances of cinemas involved with realist representation. It allows one to perceive the shared ground of neorealism and Godard's work. Godard's descriptive excursions, for instance, function both as expansions of the diegetic reality—in their attention to overseen, nonrepresented realities—and as reminders of the structural place occupied by the Barthesian "irrelevant event," the gap.

Although still operative in films, by the mid '60s the myth of unmediated reality is theoretically (and at times practically) in question. The idea of the "inherent" phenomenological yielding of the truth in film is put on hold. An oscillation between a belief in the values of reference and a critique of the "referential illusion" frames most of the French and American avant-garde film culture of the '60s. Within and outside narrative projects, the illusion of a continuum in representation is challenged. The versions of radical cinema represented by Godard and Alain Resnais (in their fiercely eclectic shifts of referential ground), Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka (in their expressive and structural projects), constitute, among several others, examples of an active bracketing of referentiality.

## From Surface to Structure: Barthes, Godard, and the Textualization of Reality

By the mid '50s, description assumes a polemical role, expounded in the theories around the *nouveau roman,* the "new novel." Alain Robbe-Grillet, in *For a New Novel,* relentlessly questions the humanist bent of the traditional novel. His fiercest attacks are directed at notions of literary analogy, which he sees as infected by a "pananthropic" notion. For Robbe-Grillet, not surprisingly, nature and its myths are "clogged" by anthropomorphic language.[43] Quoting Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*—"All the objects that surrounded me were made of the same substance as myself, of a kind of shoddy suffering"—Robbe-Grillet concludes, "Drowned in the *depth* of things, man ultimately no longer even perceives them: his role is soon limited to experiencing, in their name, totally *humanized* impressions and desires."[44] Instead, Robbe-Grillet proposes a description that records "the distance between the object and myself and the distances of the object itself (its exterior distances, i.e., its measurements)." This proposal comes down to "establishing that things are here and that they are nothing but things each limited to itself."

As description is questioned as a methodology—does it reveal its object or create it?—there is a parallel shift of interest from a humanistically informed subject matter to a concern with structures. This shift—represented in philosophy by structuralism, in psychoanalysis by Lacan, and in film by approaches such as Godard's—participates in the general demand for an analysis of everyday life and alienated existence. Perhaps this need is justified by the very nature of structure. As Poster points out, "Structures made their effects through their absences. . . . one is aware of buying this object in the store, not of the structure of commodities."[45]

Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) explicitly attempts to make this structuring absence somehow visible. The significance of Barthes's book lies both in its focus on everyday activities as refracted by media—i.e., already seen as spectacle and commodity—and in its need to decode such subjects as wrestling matches, Garbo's face, ornamental cookery, soap powders and detergents, and other myths as languages. The critical approach that Barthes proposes leans on semiology, unveiling the "natural given" as a historical construct.

With the expansion of the interest in subjecting reality to textual examination, using semiology as a bridge, cultural critics perceive the notion of the everyday as complicit with consumer society and its figures of specta-

cle and visibility (i.e., the devices through which that society makes itself amenable to desire, in advertising, fashion, and so on). The mass media are seen to epitomize the diffuse powers of alienation in the quotidian. In a more historicizing vein than Barthes's *Elements of Semiology* and *Mythologies,* Lefebvre sketches, through the precarious semiological term "collapse of referentials," what he sees as the disintegration of everyday life. For him, the process starts in the early twentieth century and attains its apogee during the postindustrial period of the mid '50s and early '60s: "The enormous amount of *signifiers* liberated or insufficiently connected to their corresponding signifieds (words, gestures, images and signs), and thus made available for advertising and propaganda: a smile as the symbol of everyday happiness."[46]

Given the massive industrialization that the production of household goods had undergone by the early '60s, along with the new media pressure to participate in the market, Marxist critics such as Lefebvre and Jean Baudrillard (*Le système des objets,* 1968, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe,* 1972) found themselves forced to analyze the change in the relation between man and product. As Michel de Certeau puts it in his introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life,* consumption, "an activity that is unsigned, unreadable and unsymbolized," becomes the cultural/economic production of nonproducers.[47] The writings of both Lefebvre and Baudrillard retain a nostalgic tinge: the first author privileges speech as the single realm of unity between sign and meaning, the second sets his analysis of functionality and serially produced objects against a moment when objects still retained some relation with human, natural time. (The time a tree takes to grow, for instance, sustains the symbolic value of wooden furniture.) To address the social changes manifest after World War II, both Lefebvre and Baudrillard refer to a lost moment, when society relied more on artisanal production.[48]

Even before postmodern writers celebrate the idea of nondiscrimination between levels of authenticity, one witnesses a relatively simpler acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of representation in social life. This recognition, exemplified in Godard, corresponds to a historical moment in which a humanist Marxism still envisages a critical gesture that might transform society. Godard's jumbling of different referential registers in his cinematic textures is situated at this juncture; his work absorbs the critical analysis of the disjunction between sign and referent performed by Lefebvre and Barthes, along with phenomenology's fascination with the "inherence of man in the world" defended by Merleau-Ponty. Godard's apparently contradictory fascination with and demystification of the sur-

face of things can be read through this critical nexus. For implicit in the critique of "the collapse of referentials" carried on by both Lefebvre and Barthes is a romantic longing: Barthes's "third meaning" or "obtuse meaning," in its purposive praise of ambivalence (of how much more one can read into an image), can be aligned with the inscrutable face of Henry Fonda as Godard describes it in his early writings (an analysis inflected in its turn by Bazin's phenomenology). Discussing Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man,* Godard writes,

> Reaction shot and long close-up of Henry Fonda, staring abstractedly, pondering, thinking, being. . . . The beauty of each of these close-ups, with their searching attention to the passage of time, comes from the sense that necessity is intruding on triviality, essence on existence. . . . Its only criterion is the exact truth. We are watching the most fantastic of adventures because we are watching the most perfect, the most exemplary, of documentaries.[49]

By the early '60s, the critique of consumption takes on the ironic shape of pop art, which Godard's cinema brilliantly assimilates in a clear grasp of the double register of images. In subscribing to the regime of quotation, in reproducing images (posters, fashion photos, outdoor shots, etc.) as opposed to reality, Godard's cinema, from *Breathless* (1959) to *Alphaville* (1965) and *Made in USA* (1966), sows the seed of a double referentiality that later artists, in a different, postmodern frame, will purposefully blur and make indistinct. Unlike Warhol's and Cindy Sherman's work, however, Godard's films rather accentuate the borders between the different realities they refer to, even when not calling attention to them explicitly. In *Two or Three Things,* for example, Godard discusses the sorts of realities he might be focusing on as the camera scans and analyzes potential subjects. The critical anxiety of being unable to cover reality in its entirety is transformed into a poetic semantic quest. Over images of Juliette's husband's garage, Godard whispers in voice-over,

> Are these really the words and the images I should employ? Are they the only ones? Aren't there others? Do I speak too loud? . . . Do I look from too far or from too close? . . . should one speak of Juliette or of the leaves? Since it is impossible, anyway, to talk about both at the same time . . . let's say they both were swiftly trembling in this late October afternoon.[50]

In Godard, the filmic and semantic vocabulary includes choice. This is a far cry from Warhol's work, in which the camera stares seemingly unques-

tioningly, for what seems too long a time, at realities already loaded with public status (the Empire State Building, say), or at would-be star performers. Although Warhol's politics of banalizing meaning couldn't be more distant from Godard's creation of a political meaning for the banal and the quotidian, both directors' works are major signifiers of the limits of the critical gesture in cinema.

Godard's critique of referential illusions and his simultaneous debt to existentialism and semiotics will be discussed later in this book. We turn now to another cinema involved in an equation of the dramatic and the banal.

### Beyond Cinematic Positivism: The Antirescue Cinema of Andy Warhol

Zavattini, reporting an American film producer's description of the difference between Hollywood and neorealist narrative, zealously and emphatically corrects him by introducing no less than a cinematic ideal: he demands more.

> "This is how *we* (in Hollywood) would imagine a scene with an aeroplane. The plane passes by . . . a machine gun fires . . . the plane crashes . . . and this is how *you* [neorealists] would imagine it. The plane passes by . . . the plane passes by again . . . the plane passes by once more. . . . " He was right. But we have still not gone far enough. It is not enough to make the aeroplane pass by three times: we must make it pass by twenty times.[51]

Zavattini's rhetoric emerges in the order of excess. It is composed of exclamations: "Today! Today! Today!"[52] His interviews, notes, and articles constantly repeat the need to repeat. The climax of this energy for analyzing social fact lies in the director's plea that a film should follow the life of a man to whom nothing happens for ninety minutes.

Implicit in Zavattini's plea is a call for a relation between theme and form—between the quotidian and a "truer" temporal relation in representing it. Such a relation might involve the pairing of routine activity with some visual or narrative suggestion of recurrence, or with an attempt at literal rendition. From repetition to representation in real, literal time, one traverses a wide spectrum of narrative possibilities. In either case, what is suggested is a surplus of reality. This surplus can be provided by the expansive illusion of repetition—"She woke up, as she does any morning"—

or in that of a one-to-one relation between representation and reality: the illusion of the unique or singular record, the literal representation.

While excess rules both Zavattini's inflammatory rhetoric and Warhol's literal cinematic procedures, Zavattini's motto is not exactly answered by the extended duration of films such as Warhol's *Eat* (1963), *Kiss* (1963), *Sleep* (1963), etc., or for that matter by the daily activities depicted in real time in *Jeanne Dielman*. Both Warhol and Akerman choose the literal approach rather than the "iterative" representation (the deduction of a recurrent series through the presentation of a single event). But there is a crucial difference between, on the one hand, Akerman's and Warhol's excesses, both a form of minimal hyperrealism, and, on the other, the expansive thrust of neorealist narrative, which, for example, may try to signify all unemployed Italians through a single character such as Umberto D. The minimal-hyperrealist rendition undoes any idea of symbolic transcendence. Besides injecting representation with the effect of a surplus of reality, literal time robs it of the possibility of standing for something other than that concrete instance.

For Zavattini, "no other medium of expression has cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things that we believe worth showing, as they happen day by day—in what we might call their 'dailiness,' their longest and truest duration."[53] This duration that he proposes as innately cinematic is more appropriately seen as another figure of the excess required in the unending search for truth, an excess of the same order as the ability Margaret Mead imagines a 360-degree camera might have to register a vanishing tribe, or of the fixed camera she mentions in her discussion of film's potential for objectivity: "The camera or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not tuned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen."[54] Mead could not have known that she was advocating for her objective record the same basic cinematic framing—the long fixed take—that would reveal the amazing performances in Warhol's films, and would create the rigid, distanced, albeit subjective perspective in Akerman's.

In Warhol, for instance, the issue of the degree of objectivity in representation is moot. With an ethnographic sensibility (his films show the interactions of a very specific "tribe"), Warhol undermines observational and direct cinema by hyperbolizing, to the point of caricature, the very basis of their existence: the notion of noninterference. He trades their positive indexing of the ethic of noninterference for the equally ethical, and in his case actively political, stance of indifference. Merely by enhanc-

ing duration, the fixity of the frame, and the intrusion of chance, he undermines the belief underlying observational cinema and American direct cinema that a measured closeness between subject and object guarantees objectivity.[55]

Warhol's attack on the subject/object dichotomy is twofold. First, he undermines the path of anthropological enterprise by deflating its pretext. Once one chooses as one's object something already of known interest, there is nothing to be discovered. Shrouded with prior representations—being, in fact, banal, even clichéd—the object makes no claim to be newly unearthed or newly revealed in Warhol's films. It is a surface before he records it in film. On screen, the Empire State Building comes "alive" only in disallowing essence—comes alive as a simulacrum.

Second, Warhol's fixed camera and extended takes exaggerate the filmmaker's usual interest in the subject to the point of blindness. If a fixed camera in principle means noninterference, a zoom shot signals closeness; from neorealism to observational cinema, from direct cinema and cinema verité to Rossellini's didactic films, a savvy combination of long takes and zooms represents the compromise between lack of mediation and genuine interest. But Warhol overdoes these techniques, altogether discrediting interest, as well as cinematic functionality. His aleatory zooms (in *The Chelsea Girls*, 1966, *Lonesome Cowboys*, 1967, etc.) flaunt an arbitrariness that comments retroactively on a whole range of essentialist quests in cinema.

Warhol exposes the limits of the humanist perspective in cinema. He defies it initially by suggesting a radical lack of empathy among filmmaker, object, and spectator: the cinematic and the profilmic are purposefully at odds, resulting either in a busy—*The Chelsea Girls, Vinyl* (1965)—or a simplified—*Sleep, Blow Job* (1963)—arbitrariness that never caters to the spectator. Warhol's forty-five—minute *Eat*, six-hour *Sleep,* and eight-hour *Empire* (1964) resemble exaggerated responses to Zavattini's plea for a film that would follow someone to whom nothing happens for ninety minutes. After Warhol's attack on spectatorial comfort, Zavattini's assertion, once bold in its privileging of "nothingness," seems too careful a compromise: ninety minutes, after all, is the normal length of a commercial feature. Warhol's films mock and subvert all the basic values associated with neorealist "nothingness." Warhol's extended renditions of cliché images create a different register through which to read neorealism's narrativized phenomenology of the quotidian. His gaze allows no space for the heroic. The changing backgrounds that, in neorealism, throw the constancy of the hero into perspective is dropped. In place of a narra-

tive in which the humanist hero is outlined against a tokenistic surface of varying sites and situations, Warhol proposes an antinarrative in which variety issues from any object looked at long enough. Instead of cashing in on the neglected and "irrelevant"—the neorealist strategy—Warhol doubles the banality of his objects by promoting an overvisibility where it is superfluous. In overdoing his reductions (single themes filmed for extended periods of time), Warhol excludes even the limited suggestiveness of neorealism's policy of variegation and tokenism.

Bazin more than anyone sees realism to be at its best when it pursues ideas of noninterference and the integrity of reality so as to enlarge the perceptual field of representation. Hence he puts a moral value on the use of the long take and depth of field at the expense of montage; for him, these devices forgo artifice. Discontinuity and gaps constitute the main threats to the flawless homogeneity of a cinema intended as an analogue to an equally full reality. Taking this idea one step further, what matters is no longer the actual physical integrity of representation—its lack of cuts—but that it *appear* to be physically integral (as in *Umberto D*).[56] Despite Bazin's theories (but in accord with his aesthetic inclinations), from Jean Renoir to Rossellini, the textural integrity provided through the long take has been less an assurance of homogeneity than the counterpoint to a mise-en-scène intended to resist harmony. The long take here is meant not as an analogue for reality but as one more element in a subtle weave of artifice and spontaneity, of theatricality and realistic detail. Modern cinema's appropriation of the long take is to be understood as the background for the emergence of an "effect of reality," in Barthes's sense. The "irrelevant detail" (Rossellini's term) appears best when set in an unfractured shot.

Warhol's literal representations foreclose on the differential play between depth and surface that constitutes the truth of modernist cinema. Rossellini, Renoir, Akerman, and other modernist realists use the qualities of cinema to set up material clashes with idealized versions of reality. Warhol establishes a forceful and arbitrary entropy of registers. One could say that with Warhol, the materiality and concreteness that pop up in these directors' films are drastically amplified as pure (and passive) resistance. Warhol undoes the main knot underwriting their visions of a truer cinema. Where they invoke intention, he seems indifferent. His cinematic choices are aprioristic, and provoke randomness of performance (in his scripted films) and perceptual arbitrariness (in his early work). At the base of any cinema *engagé* is human interest. In Warhol, interest is challenged on all fronts: the filmmaker is absent, the object is banal, the spectator is bored. The spectator's confrontation with his or her own physical and mental

endurance delineates a cinema that has given up on the notions of truth that sustain other alternative cinema (Akerman's included). But interest is not simply traded for indifference, for the Warhol strategy puts forth a politics of indifferentiation: identity wavers between representation and reality, between acting and being, flickering constantly and unstably.

By contrast with Warhol's politics of indifference neorealism's and cinema verité's search for authenticity in reenacting events seems hampered by its desire to find a truth lying always beyond materiality, beyond the body. As suggested, Warhol's undermining of search, effort, and intention makes any cinematic approach seem lame before it even gets close to its object. So his cinema never does get close: Warhol does not *intend* to "get inside" the objects of his cinema (as Rouch would have it). Yet neither does it search for a feeling of being "outside"—for an alienation effect, of the kind that might give rise to a sudden empathy (as in Godard, Bresson, and Rossellini). The literalness of Warhol's cinema qualifies these two approaches. On the one hand, the event's radical duration on screen disallows the equation of fissures in the illusion with truth. His work provokes such a random surfacing of fissures—mistakes in performance (*The Chelsea Girls*), shifts in address (*Beauty #2*, 1965), mixings of genres (*Lonesome Cowboys*)—that a gap or error cannot be taken as more true than articulated speech. On the other hand, his enhancement of cinematic materiality is so pervasive as to defy the pedagogic thrust of a modernist cinema intent on the disclosure of materiality (Godard and Straub and Huillet being the main examples). Moreover, it is precisely through an apparently unfissured surface, in a Bazinian sense, that Warhol shifts discontinuity from the text onto the spectator's perception.

Neither Bazin's concept of an unfissured realist representation nor Warhol's overturning of such a notion, however, responds fully to the neorealist desire for totality. This essentialist conception leans on metonymic expansion, which might dissect for us, for instance, the bedroom where Umberto D sleeps, but might also create a physical and moral geography that suggests a totality. In this respect, the attention to details, and the presentation of sites and events as illustrative tokens, operates in neorealist film in much the same way as the display of iconographic images works to shape allegorical meanings in conventional cinema. In *Bicycle Thieves,* all of Rome (or rather all of Italy and of the postwar world) is meant to be represented by the syncretically woven neighborhoods and sites that Antonio traverses. The wanderings of the characters in *Umberto D* or *Bicycle Thieves* signify a solely "physical" coverage of reality only superficially: here multiplicity—of spaces, of people—always reconvenes on a center,

sucked back to it by a human perspective that is represented in the films by a human body, a hero. It is this heroic body, the generic postwar individual, that Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* takes to task. While Warhol substitutes the character's body for the filmic body, transforming the one-to-one nature of literal representation in an ultimate decentering of humanism, Akerman proves how a body can flicker in and out of character (through a kind of oscillating perception made possible by literal representation) and still further a narrative.

Akerman's minimal hyperrealism, in so many ways similar to Warhol's, makes a positive claim to tell a story; her equation of drama and everydayness is made from within narrative. Moreover, it is in instituting another sort of hero(ine) that she mounts her blows on essentialist humanism. The singularity of Akerman's Jeanne defies the generic humanism of Umberto D or Antonio. The historical grounding of this sort of heroine is represented at its best in Akerman's fusion of a minimalist hyperrealist sensibility with an acute awareness of 70's micropolitics, and of feminism in particular. And it is this awareness of the singularity of a woman's everydayness that forms the backbone of Akerman's corporeal cinema, a cinema whose split concern with referentiality and cinematic materiality can be examined in the context of other contemporaneous artistic practices.

## 2  TOWARD A CORPOREAL CINEMA

### Theatricality in the '70s

*I think his solution to the problem . . . is relevant because his work was representational. The complicated involvement of his perception of exterior reality; his creation of a work which both represents and is something, his respect for a lot of levels are exemplary to me.*—Michael Snow on Cézanne.[1]

*In my films I follow an opposite trajectory to that of the makers of political films. They have a skeleton, an idea and then they put on flesh: I have in the first place the flesh, the skeleton appears later.*—Chantal Akerman, 1975[2]

Akerman's cinema is post-Godardian in sensibility. The filmmaker's opposition of flesh to skeleton epitomizes the dichotomy between event and structure, which animates the notion of a truthful, adequate representation of reality during the '50s and '60s.[3] More than merely privileging experience, Akerman's corporeal metaphor indicates her concern with going beyond the material and structural aspects of cinema. Her interest in human physicality has a weight that differs significantly from the aesthetics of surface in modernist cinema.[4]

Akerman's hyperrealist cinema revises the modernist stress on materiality at the expense of referentiality. Following the suggestion present in Michael Snow's cinema and expressed in his appreciation for Cézanne,[5] Akerman's assertion of a representational narrative disregards the '60s indictment of the realist image.[6] Her emphasis on the representational as well as the material aspects of cinema suggests an alternative to both an

analogical realism (like neorealism, for instance) and a realism of ideas (such as Jean-Luc Godard's anti-illusionistic project). Subordinating the issue of anti-illusionism and its informing dyads (surface versus Renaissance perspective, discourse versus story, etc.), she also breaks with the resolute frontality (direct address) of certain trends in cinematic modernism.

Akerman works within the "fluctuation of emphasis from the concrete/materialist to the naturalist/realist."[7] Explaining the fixity of her camera in her structural documentary *Hotel Monterey* (1972), Akerman states the main principle of minimal and hyperrealist aesthetics: "When you look at a picture, if you look just one second you get the information, 'that's a corridor.' But after a while you forget it's a corridor, you just see that it's yellow, red, lines: and then it comes back as a corridor."[8]

In *Hotel Monterey* and *News from Home* (1976), two of Akerman's films made in New York under the influence of structural filmmaking, a fixed shot of an empty corridor or of a crowded subway car (human absence, human presence) maps the range of possibilities of structural film. When the elevator door opens onto an empty corridor in *Hotel Monterey,* the image can be considered as a set of lines, colors, perspectival illusions. When it opens into a hall full of people, the camera address is articulated more interestingly, as a problem: this moment of mutual acknowledgment intimates a register of performance for documentary structural film. The dichotomy between two kinds of space (the elevator and the various floors) is acknowledged only when the "shutter"—the elevator doors—is open. This is also the point at which the dyad of viewer and object is activated, in a mirroring effect. The camera is fixed—in the elevator, or, in *News from Home,* perpendicular to the opening doors of a moving subway train, granting an ever-changing scenario, as new strangers encounter it. The camera stubbornly addresses this obtrusive viewer, as briefly as the contact of a glance or for as long as a stare.[9] The relative closeness of the hotel transients or subway riders to the camera turns into an example of proxemics (the study of the social and psychological boundaries that define the proper spaces between people in diverse situations). In *News from Home* the camera "functions as a recording device in suspense."[10] The camera's potency is measured for some time; finally, it is revealed as too insistent, when it forces a rider into the deep perspective of a whole subway car, and even into the next car, until he vanishes from sight. In both films, the fixed, oblivious camera creates both frame and impetus for the emergence of performance and of camera address on the part of passersby.

That a layered dimension, usually of a performatic order, results from an

Subway passenger faces the camera before moving into the next car, *News from Home* (1976). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

excessively dry cinema will be one of my claims regarding Akerman's theatricality. Most immediately Akerman's theatricality refers to her privilege to the profilmic. She has claimed that she does not make montage films: "Before me, Dreyer, Bresson and even certain Japanese directors did that. My work is close to other filmmakers regarding the use of the camera. What I did in *Jeanne Dielman* are actions in real time: the fixed camera is not, for me, that different from . . . Warhol."[11] The fixed focus and extended duration of Akerman's shots create a relatively stable texture that allows one to perceive the disjunctions between body and character, speech and script. The predictability of her methods of framing and cutting forces one to attend instead to her mise-en-scène.

Still, Akerman's cinematic strategies, her extended scrutiny of a reduced setup or a single character is itself far from neutral. Duration and the sense of rigor that derives from her unchanging compositions and limited number of camera setups are crucial in establishing the feeling of a wavering between "illusion" and "fact." Long takes, with little in the way of action, elicit a hyperacute perception, in which one recognizes both the image's literal and its representational aspects.

Discussing a scene in his *11 × 14* (1976), the minimalist filmmaker Benning confirms this effect of duration:

Old woman faces the camera and hesitates to enter the elevator, *Hotel Monterey* (1972). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

> When you start to watch the smokestack scene it's obviously a smoke-stack and you can apply particular meanings to that, even clichéd meanings like pollution or phallic symbol—but since it's on for seven minutes and a half eventually you have to deal with it as swirling grain on screen. Near the end of the scene, however, a *plane comes through, so that after you've begun to look at the image formally it's reintroduced into the narrative* [my italics].[12]

Thus sudden actions (the plane coming through), but also extended duration itself (which, for example, can make the image Akerman discusses in *Hotel Monterey* come back as "corridor"), can eventually tip images back to their representational function. A crucial quality of extended duration, then, is this polarity of reception.

The oscillation between (or rather coexistence of) representational and literal registers can be further proposed as the hyperrealist factor intrinsic to Akerman's cinema. Hyperrealism is understood here as a cinematic translation of the effect of distance that results when a picture or sculpture reproduces a subject which is already an image—when, for example, a Richard Estes painting reproduces a photograph. There is a doubling effect here: we are looking at an intermediary, frozen stage of reproduction,

A man crosses the subway platform and reveals the space perspective, *News from Home* (1976). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

which subtly undoes referentiality, presenting it at a second degree of removal. In some hyperrealist art, this distancing effect also results from an exaggerated focus on apparently mundane details of reality, and from a change of scale. The emphasis on surface details intimates an estrangement, an excess—one sees more than one needs to in order to "read" the image.

What are the exact terms of this effect's transference from plastic to cinematic representation? How does cinema construe this distance that pierces the referent? In the passage from untroubled realism to uncanny hyperrealism, a principal device for the filmmaker is extended duration. Hyperreality is attained through a fake impression of depth, the excess of detail resulting from a fixed stare. At the core of the defamiliarizing hyperrealist image, of its simulacrum effect, lies the hesitation between the literal and the symbolic registers exemplified in the work of Benning and Akerman, as well as in Warhol's and Michael Snow's cinema.

Warhol's minimal-hyperrealist cinema can be proposed as a layered, material realism. Even when Warhol records a natural referent (for example in *Sleep,* 1963) or a reality such as the Empire State Building, ridden with prior representations, his exaggerated focus always tips representation from its figurative to its literal properties and vice versa. And Snow creates a version of conceptual cinema by emphasizing the structuring

principles of this oscillation. In *One Second in Montreal* (1969) still images of sites for public sculptures, covered by snow, also provide under extended scrutiny a wavering between an illusion of reality and flatness. Both filmmakers fully develop the consequences of a process of layering present in other artistic practices. In taking as their referent a reality already caught in images, both pop and hyperrealist art prefigure the postmodernist ethos in which it is impossible, not to mention futile, to distinguish between a natural and a textual reality.

Also of interest in thinking about a layered representation is modernist narrative cinema's dependence on texts: films such as Jean Marie Straub and Daniélle Huillet's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1967), Roberto Rossellini's *Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966), Dreyer's *Gertrud* (1964), and Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950) adopt a novel, play, or document as their text, creating in the process a deliberate awkwardness of delivery and performance. The text sits uneasily in these adaptations; it becomes an extra material layer.

My interest in this chapter is to establish a parallel between the two processes of layering in two distinct aesthetics. The dual register of figuration and literalness promoted by extended duration in American experimental film and the inscription of a second-degree realism in European modernist cinema, both involve a *corporeal dimension:* insisting on and amplifying the referential aspect of representation, they constantly remind the viewer of physical, material presences—of cinema, of the actor/performer, of the spectator.

While in Akerman's early films the issue of performance is a by-product of a fixed, oblivious camera modeled on Warhol and on structural filmmaking, her later, narrative films involve an oblique mise-en-scène and a mode of address—the monotone dialogue-qua-monologues of *Jeanne Dielman* and *Meetings with Anna*—that recall the antinaturalist cinema of Bresson and Dreyer. Through Akerman's films, I will explore the points of rapprochement between these two cinemas. Geared in Europe to a textualized antinaturalism (Bresson, Eric Rohmer, Dreyer's *Gertrud,* etc.), in the United States to experiments with proto- and infranarrative forms (Warhol, Snow, James Benning), these bodies of work reflect unique approaches to narrative and performance. In Akerman, they meet through a radical reconsideration of the notion of theatricality. My use of this term becomes clear once we consider how Akerman's minimal hyperrealism creates an effect of presence.[13]

The enhanced indexicality of Akerman's aesthetic encompasses, moreover, an emphasis on the physical presence and performance of her actors

and characters. suggesting an interest in a more concrete (less transcendent or ideal) human presence that is inflected by specific theatrical traditions. One of these is the European tradition that combines a desire for narrative and a strong antinaturalism; its main trope is Bertolt Brecht's notion of "quotation," of a text spoken in such a way as to reveal its social and historical preexistence. "Natural" speech is acknowledged as fabrication, and character as a relay of this knowledge. As we shall see, Akerman qualifies this Brechtian notion of quotation. A second notion of the theatrical present in Akerman's work derives from American art of the '60s and '70s, when a general concern with dissolving the boundaries between reality and representation was translated into a widespread use of real-time representation—a strategy of special consequence in Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles.*

## The United States in Real Time: Minimal, Hyperreal, and Structural

Akerman's stay in the United States in the early '70s exposed her to experimental film, minimal art, and new American dance and performance art. During 1972 she frequented Anthology Film Archives, Millenium, and attended, along with the cinematographer and filmmaker Babette Mangolte, performance events. A brief discussion of the noncinematic background of her aesthetics allows an understanding of the import of real-time representation in the early '70s, and the phenomenological proclivity that marks her realism is best understood in the context of the revision of modernist art in the United States in the mid-'60s.

Clement Greenberg's writings of the '50s had defined modernist art as bound ultimately toward a reduction to its own material specificity.[14] In different ways, pop and hyperrealist art addressed such art's entrenchment in pictorial abstraction—its dual proscription of figuration and concept. By including the external world as subject matter, by depicting circulating, graphic commodities such as ads, product labels, and photos of movie stars, pop art assaulted the equation of modern art with abstraction.

Initiating a layering process crucial in the '60s revision of referentiality, pop art contributes a more ironic image for the critique of the sign and of consumer society advanced by Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Henri Lefebvre in '60s France. Revising the opposition between modernism and realism, pop art makes pseudo-objective use of mechanical printing processes (silk screens, cutouts) to stress a public, serialized version of the everyday. Hyperrealist art, coming after minimalism and pop, also

displays a concern with the phenomenology of the everyday, providing a visual analogue for the role of description in the *nouveau roman*.[15]

Hyperrealists such as Richard Estes and Duane Hanson create "second natures," giving surface details of their referents—reflections on windows, skin crevices—a mediated attention. In Estes's paintings, the transparency of the window is replaced by reflections, which block the view of whatever is behind the glass. As his intermediate photographs prove, appearances disallow a priori knowledge: "Perhaps the more you show the way things look the less you show how they are or how we think they are."[16] Likewise, the detail and concreteness of Hanson's sculptures counter an abstractive, reductive reading of the human presence. This move toward particularization can be likened to Akerman's interest in the uniqueness of the individual:

> The topics of the radical realists are specific and singular. The people portrayed are individuals by name, age and certain personal characteristics. Man is no longer the ordinary representative or the statistically created average man of mass media demographies or the superstar cliché (as in Warhol). Rather particular attention is paid to . . . the uniqueness of a person.[17]

Blurring the line between reality and representation was the impetus behind a variety of art of the period from the mid '60s to the mid '70s. Hyperrealism, through its overdetailed reproduction of reality or of a mediated image, problematizes referentiality; '60s happenings and minimalist art and '70s performance and video break away from the canvas and into experience. Apparently subscribing to the modernist decree of simplification and evacuation of content, minimal art actually proposes one of the most radical alternatives to modernism, challenging the instantaneity of apprehension that for Greenberg or Michael Fried defines the presentness of art as an escape from duration—as "pure" opticality. Indeed, in "Art and Objecthood" (1967), Fried fiercely attacks the "theatrical," experiential dimension of minimal art and rejects some of that art's defining traits—duration, spatial relations, and attention to the role of the beholder.

Instead of an "abstract spectatordom," minimalism proposes an experience exercised by a subject whose "corporeal density both guaranteed and was made possible by the interconnectedness of all its sensory fields so that an abstracted visuality could make no more sense than an abstracted tactility."[18] In the works of minimalists Donald Judd and Robert Morris,[19] both the "unitary form"—the form without internal configuration—and

seriality push viewers to confront their concept of what a form is like.[20] As Morris puts it, "The constant shape of the cube held in the mind but which the viewer never literally experiences, is an actuality against which the literal changing, perspective views are related."[21]

Part of the significance of Akerman's bodily metaphor of the flesh and the skeleton is to suggest that the body-in-general addressed by the minimalists in the '60s is, as Rosalind Krauss argues, the same body that is particularized in the art of the '70s and '80s.

A clear example of how the spectator's awareness of his or her own physicality may be eventually linked to a politicized aesthetics is ex-emplified in Akerman's and Yvonne Rainer's cinema. *Je tu il elle* (1974) makes clear Akerman's debt to minimalist principles of cumulative se-riality. In the film (discussed in detail in chapter 4) Akerman exhausts a conjugation of positions for herself and her prop, a mattress. She adheres to Yvonne Rainer's move toward a more concrete everydayness in perfor-mance, to the choreographer and dancer's minimalist mandate that perfor-mance emphasize movement at the expense of psychology. Akerman's moving of the mattress around her room in *Je tu il elle* and Rainer's use of valises and boxes in the performance *Grand Union Dreams* (1971) are examples of task-oriented performance in which the object, rather than being the butt of an action called for by character or plot, is a prop to objectify and banalize gesture and movement.

The affinities among minimal art, performance art, and minimalist and structural film clarify how strategies of real-time representation, repeti-tion, and seriality engage the spectator's body, a critical step for a corporeal cinema. Two major formal tendencies, both committed to engaging the spectator's awareness of his or her own physicality and perception, are rehearsed again and again in '60s and '70s art. In the first, an excess of information, given through a multiple input of issues, shapes, gestures, and media, divides one's attention. The Fluxus group's and John Cage's performances, Allan Kaprow's happenings, and New American dance (Rainer, Simone Forti, Lucinda Childs, Merce Cunningham) all advance the recognition that simultaneity—a copresence of events internal and external to the text—can effect a nondirected field of spectator response, frustrating the acknowledgment of authorship and intention. Silence, for instance, becomes a composite of aleatory audience sound and, to Cage, emptiness, just as multiple images open the terrain of nonintentionality.[22] Spectatorial focus is dispersed over a fractured surface.

In the second, minimalist tendency, simplified shapes, single events, and series of repeated images or forms seem both to block interpretation

and to mock the immediacy of apprehension proposed in modernist art. The spectator's extended gaze over holistic forms displaces the burden of decentering entirely onto his or her perceptual and physical relation to the art object. Duration is a major factor in minimalism's continuous exchange between abstractive, conceptual procedures and sensorially based experience. The insistence on simplified forms, or on seriality, makes the experiential time and space of the spectator's confrontation with the work as obdurate as the forms presented; the work "works" solely through the viewer's persistence in time. Here, the term "simultaneity" refers not only to the display of several events at one time but to the bleeding of the work into its conditions of reception. More accurately, it refers to the coexistence of representation and spectator. In cinema, the representation of events in real time is a principal way of bringing this coexistence about.

While aleatoriness and multiplicity are perfectly adequate to "silence" intentionality in a work, they are easier to effect in theatrical or live performance than in cinema. In cinema, the demand that the observer's gaze negotiate simultaneous foci of attention may be prompted through multiple-screen projection. Or, in projects as diverse as that of the Fluxus group and of structural materialist film, a film's screening is shown as dependent on contingency: as the scratches and dirt accumulate on the empty screen of Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* or of George Landow's *film in which there appear sprocket holes, edge lettering, dirt particles, etc* (1966), the specificities of both cinema and performance are recognized—cinema in its predicament of repetition, performance in its condition of aleatory uniqueness.[23]

Another solution, following André Bazin's notion of a wandering spectatorial focus, is the long take, which may or may not exhibit the many planes of a deep-focus shot. Warhol's cinema shows that both a simultaneity of events on screen and the extended duration of a single image or event can forestall unidirectional apprehension. *Empire*, with its single image and extended duration, as much as *The Chelsea Girls*, with its screening of two segments at a time and its busy, haphazard zooms, attests to Warhol's welcoming of "noise," both within the work's structure and surrounding its reception.

Underlying all these procedures is a sense of the exhaustion of meaning. Both pure, holistic shapes and an endless substitution and juxtaposition of paradigmatic camera shots, a layering of formal plays, are strategies to deflect signification. A simplified shape, content, or process can hamper logical apprehension no less than an excess of associations (as in several game structures proposed by Frampton, Snow, and Landow). Richard

Serra's *Hands Scraping* (1968) visualizes a process of reduction, literally leading to an "empty" screen. The process is in some ways consonant with modernism's repression of content and privileging of art's material and experiential dimensions; but unlike Greenberg's modernism, the minimalist project seeks to elicit a subjective investment through subject matter that approximates the blank screen.[24]

Referring to the "inconclusiveness" that characterizes the '70s films, Patricia Patterson and Manny Farber have distinguished between two types of seventies film structure: "dispersal and shallowboxed space."[25] Their examples of the first type of film are *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *"Rameau's Nephew" by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Shoen* (1974), and *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974); their examples of the second are *In the Realm of Senses* (1976), *Katzelmacher* (1969), *Nostalgia* (1972), and "the various short films of minimalist sculptors and painters," which "present a shallow stage with the ritualized, low-population-image squared to the edges of the frame."[26] They associate this strategy with Akerman's use of real time.

Akerman's reduction of elements of scrutiny is indeed akin to that of structural minimalist film.[27] In all of her work real-time representation engages the spectator's awareness of his or her own physical presence. Moreover, in her structural work, fixed, extended shots combine with aleatory, unique events, setting structure against play and bringing out a performance aspect that is basic to '70s aesthetics. This concern can be detected in Akerman's early films *La Chambre 1*, *La Chambre 2*[28] and *Hotel Monterey* (1972), and also in *News from Home* (1977).

*La Chambre 2* is a 360-degree panning survey of a room. As the camera pans steadily to the left, Akerman lies on the bed, facing the camera while she rocks her head against the back of the bed. The second time around she is covered and rocks under the sheets half covering her face. During the next circular pan, in a half-sitting position, she looks distractedly and holds an apple. She doesn't look at the camera but plays with the apple with her fingers. The camera stops at what we now distinguish as halfway through the entire length of the pan and reverses its direction. We see Chantal nibbling the apple; the camera moves on and then shifts to left again. She's biting the apple and looking at the camera. The camera moves leftward and stops at the same point as before, shifting to the right again. Chantal vigourously bites the apple as the camera performs a complete turn to the left, meeting Chantal again rubbing her eyes as she lies down facing the camera. The rigid formal parameters set for each film—the 360-degree pan in *La Chambre 2*, the scanning of the entire building from

basement to roof, from evening to dawn, in the axial movements of *Hotel Monterey,* the fixed symmetrical shots in *News from Home*—allow chance events to define themselves as privileged foci of attention: a passenger's refusal to confront the camera in the cramped space of an elevator and a pedestrian's desire to turn around every few steps and look at the camera mounted in a subway corridor are examples of unique events generated, so it seems, by the camera's circumscribed viewfinder.

The films in which Akerman herself performs share this dynamic of address. In *Je tu il elle* and in *La Chambre 2,* Akerman assumes different forms of address vis-à-vis the camera. From posed indifference to resolute confrontation, whether denying or engaging the camera's seemingly mechanical trajectory, Akerman creates momentary interlockings between her gaze and the camera's. In a push-pull dynamic, her presence in the films links the spaces behind and in front of the camera.

One might extend the terms of Akerman's reflexivity. Like a mirror, the camera creates a presence that is always split;[29] the performance aspect of all Akerman's films defines a place for the spectator coextensive with the camera's gaze. This gaze might seem impassive, but its relation with the profilmic event is in fact intensely provocative. The forms of address solicited through this setup delineate a dialogue between Godard and Warhol: the seeming obliviousness of the cinematic (camera movement, framing, and editing) toward the profilmic activates a kind of spectator participation that inaugurates a post-Godardian reflexivity. For Akerman, this will mean a camera address less intent on revealing or mediating a statement of truth, a camera address that locks the spectator within a mechanical, apparently unmotivated mise-en-scène.

The unmotivated (Warholian) camera confronts two pulsating materialities, two bodies: one is the character's cinematic body, the other the body of the spectator. Between these different rhythms—that of camera, performer, and spectator—a tension creates the specific theatricality of structural minimalist film. Benning's staging of micro-occurrences to brush up against his static landscape shots in *11 × 14,* and Snow's quasi-narrative mementos in *Wavelength* (1967) and *Back and Forth* (1969), are additional bodies in this economy. (I discuss the structural minimalist notion of event in the next chapter.)

Yet as the analysis of *Je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman* make clear, Akerman's affiliation with the structural-minimalist film project is singularly qualified. Given her commitment to narrative, other factors need attention, notably her conception of character. We should return, then, to the other strand of theatricality informing Akerman's work.

### Quotation Reconsidered: European "Theatrical" Cinema

The use of quotation and the various forms of disjunction between script and speech, text and image (often associated with truth and nature), establish the commonality of, among others, Godard's, Marguerite Duras's, and Straub and Huillet's work. Emerging from a European modernist literary and theatrical tradition, these directors' films are often based on preexisting texts—novels, documents, or news events. European antinaturalism is characterized by such prior layers somehow made present, in a disjunctive effect.[30]

I should, however, describe the nature of quotation in Akerman precisely, and establish the specificity of her antinaturalism. Akerman's "talkies"—films in which text competes with long silences—confront the deeply entrenched naturalistic convention of necessary and sufficient dialogue. The unintelligible babble of method acting, which came to stand as the very sign of naturalness, is absent in Akerman's cinema. Speech becomes audible, spelled-out matter; it does not so much represent as constitute a voided interiority. Instead of showing the interior, unspeakable nature of speech through hesitations and mumbles, Akerman's characters bring communication to an impasse either by silence or by turning articulate speeches into a "bla, bla bla." 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.

Conventional cinema naturalizes verbal address, and anti-illusionist cinema tends to emphasize it. Conversely Akerman gives the text a centrality that characterizes the "theatrical" in cinema—namely, the frontal presentation of characters who speak extensively to one another. A closer study of Akerman's treatment of dialogue in chapter 6 will further an understanding of post-Brechtian, post-Godardian forms of address.

Brecht's ideas of acting and alienation techniques bear strongly on Akerman's formal politics,[31] but her work is not pedagogical as his is, and by the very fact that her mise-en-scène invokes (as it denies) a fourth wall, she problematizes the Brechtian direct address. Discussing the relation between painting and viewer in eighteenth-century France, Fried argues in his book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*[32] that the period's representations of states of absorption—people reading, listening to a story, sleeping—explicitly arise from the need to "arrest" the audience in front of the painting while paradoxically

avoiding direct address. The portrait, on the other hand, with its posed frontal address, resolutely faces the beholder. Fried shows how the "mise-en-scène" of dramatis personnae in a painting, considered successful if the people depicted were turned inward, was an explicit attempt to ignore the presence of the beholder, and it is precisely this insistent negation of the beholder, present in criticism and in the art, that indicates its problematic status in the period.

The depiction of the subject as so absorbed as to be oblivious to all but the activity in which he or she is engaged is a response to frontal address. For obviously different purposes, Akerman's cinema restages a scenario of indifference. The relation between absorption and theatricality maintained in *Jeanne Dielman, Je tu il elle,* and *Meetings with Anna* indicates the desire to reexperience, through representation, the choice between turning the face toward the scene and turning it toward the audience. The characters' relations among themselves and with the audience are not mutually exclusive here but animate each other with a certain instability.

The hyperbolic focus on the text helps create this oscillation between scene and audience. Akerman's dialogue suggests a new balance between the three levels of discourse theorized by Eric Rohmer—indirect, direct, and "hyperdirect."[33] In his essay Rohmer addresses the amount and quality of material conveyed, distinguishing between information necessary for understanding the plot and information included for the sake of verisimilitude. If Akerman's films seem theatrical it is because they often include information that might be necessary on the stage, or in a book, but is redundant in film.

Akerman challenges the didactic thrust of quotation, charging her text instead with conflicting functions. Sometimes the text telegraphs information through an excess of verbiage; sometimes the release of unwarranted information is sanctioned on other, not immediately functional levels. Akerman may alter the rhythmic value of a given sentence, deliberately confusing the registers of signification and sheer information (meaning, content) and those of expressivity and affect (rhythm, tone, etc.). Akerman's dialogues seem to answer Brecht's dictum on expressivity: "His way of speaking had to be free from parsonical sing-song and from all those cadences which lull the spectator so that the senses get lost."[34]

Brecht theorized a citational quality of speech as the main mode of denaturalizing a character; Akerman deprives this mode of its didactic thrust, the defining quality of Brecht's legacy to anti-illusionistic theater and cinema. Brecht opposes a sing-song expressivity; Akerman wants to loosen signification in favor of a more expressive communication. Brecht

separates script from performance; Akerman collapses the two, clarifying their disjunctiveness, speech and writing being always citational and marked by textuality.[35]

One might consider an alternate model for Akerman's treatment of text to be Samuel Beckett's alogical permutations and minimalist repetitions and, in film, Bresson's flattening of his characters' delivery in repetition and monotone. Through repetition, first in rehearsal, then in numerous takes, Bresson weaves a cinematic texture that recombines and intensifies sound, movement, and framing. As opposed to Brecht's eclectic collages (a technique best represented in film by Godard's montages of materials and voices, which tap different channels of rhetoric—interview, documentary, visual text, etc.), Bresson prizes the intensification of elements effected by a homogeneous texture: his subversive linearity and enhancement of diegetic sound privilege metonymic displacement rather than metaphoric association.[36] According to P. Adams Sitney's lucid distinction between a geometric style (Kubelka, Eisenstein, etc.) and a linear one, Bresson "concentrates on those figures of cinematography which produce a sense of fluidity and condensation and avoid strong rupture and interjections."[37] Bresson, like Akerman, pursues an *aesthetics of homogeneity.*

By interposing repetition between speech and script, Bresson's films dislocate the natural fit between character and performer/model. In his fiercely modernist essentialism, Bresson collapses the notion of automatism—as a natural, unthought process—with the processes of repetition inherent in cinema and cinematic reproduction. His project is to make both body and performance conform to the mechanical order of cinema, with its power to fragment and recompose. Enforcing cinema's repetitions (rehearsal, successive takes, the very projection of film in the theater) over the model's performance, Bresson suggests an antimetaphysical aesthetics: the automaton body performs the impossibility of escaping quotation.[38]

The Brecht-Bresson distinction involves a controversy that may ultimately inform the divergences between *heterogeneity* or *homogeneity* as decentering modes: cinema's ability to assimilate other art forms and matters of content as well as forms of spectator address are two main factors in establishing a nuanced antinaturalist cinema. The horror of "the aping of a non-coincidence,"[39] the disgust with the fake synchronicity of speech and sound in naturalist cinema, is enacted in a number of ways. In fact, the antinaturalist cinema that is most closely associated with the vanguard of cinematic modernism is a cinema of irony and commentary, a cinema marked by an *aesthetics of heterogeneity.*[40] This cinema has as its main intertext the repertory of reflexive strategies exposed for didactic intent

by Brecht: quotation instead of enactment, the juxtaposition of hetero-geneous materials, the eclectic use of media and modes of performance.

The Godardian aesthetic advances by juxtapositional and oppositional spurts, by a juggling of elements within filmic materiality. Godard, Straub and Huillet, Rainer, Fassbinder, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Jacques Rivette, and others promote an impure cinema. They may use, for example, a the-atrical mise-en-scène as one more variable in texture and address: films such as Straub's *The Bride, the Pimp and the Commedienne* (1968), Syber-berg's *Our Hitler* (1977), and Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1968) adopt the proscenium shot, the long shot recording a conven-tional theatrical scene (à la Méliès). Both the proscenium shot and the character's frontal address become foreign bodies in the smooth continuity of the classical film. Visual and aural breaks in continuity are made to work similarly, recalling Brecht's didactic notion of quotation. Within this modernist ethos, these breaks connote another, more than merely formal sort of rupture: that of a politicized gesture—against capital, the establish-ment, etc.[41]

Although disjunction is a staple in antinaturalistic cinema (from Soviet cinema montage to Peter Kubelka's rhythmic montage to Bruce Conner's found-footage "collages"), the agonistic modernist discourse inevitably refers to the classical or conventional text it is supposed to rupture. God-ard, for instance, describes his opaque lead character in *Alphaville* (1966) through the action ethos of the American Western:

> In all westerns . . . there is someone who arrives from nowhere, we don't know, he pushes the door of a saloon and then, at the end he vanishes, and that's all. Well, it's only a partial view of him but it is done in such a way that people believe having lived a complete story. This must be their strength. This always bothered me, I never man-aged. I started simply to deal with fragments.[42]

Hence the postwar European cinema, which Annette Michelson terms a cinema of "radical aspiration," manages to "sublimate and convert to an aesthetic purpose the dissociative principle" that underwrites its marginal position.[43] In this cinema, epitomized by the work of Godard, "the critical allegiance . . . to the conventions of Hollywood commercial cinema . . . has acted as context and precondition of formal radicalism."[44]

Akerman's work, on the other hand, makes no comment on other cine-matic modes. Its energy is not centrifugal, like Godard's, opening up onto other discourses and realities; its concentrated focus is better understood in terms of the aesthetics of homogeneity proposed by Bresson, and also by

Dreyer and Rohmer.[45] Akerman's work is syntagmatic, operating through a linear accumulation of repetitions. Akerman insists on simplified forms and singular characters and actors, as well as on minimal variations in sets and locations. The tools with which she constructs an alternative to the Brechtian/Godardian model are duration, accumulation, sobriety, and sameness. Hers is an aesthetics of *homogeneity.* Akerman's reading of cinematic naturalism is perverse: she complies excessively—and this is her transgression—with classical cinema's demand for linearity and for uniformity of texture. Her long takes and extended in-character monologues oversaturate textual and diegetic homogeneity, creating a rhythmic imbalance, a taint in classical cinema's precious equilibrium.

Akerman's formal allegiance to Bresson, Dreyer, Yasujiro Ozu, and Warhol demands an understanding of how her nondidactic antinaturalism shares in a shift in sensibility that is distinctly post-Godardian. This term is not to be taken as suggesting a surpassing of Godard's achievements. Nor should it be taken as a dismissal of Godard's political thrust; his favorite theme—the analogy between production and commodification in society and in cinema—is more powerful as a social than as a self-reflexive critique. The term "post-Godardian" should be seen, rather, as reflecting a reassessment of the axiomatic equation of politicized art with certain formal and rhetorical strategies—an equation reinforced by some of Godard's work (most notably in his Dziga Vertov period) and reified by some of his critics. For some, direct address, allusion, and metacinematic references are automatic banners of anti-illusionism and, by extension, of the filmmaker's political intervention.[46]

A reevaluation of this idea can first be detected in a critical uneasiness with cinema's overdose of Brechtian alienation techniques. In *May 68 and Film Culture,* Silvia Harvey makes a distinction between the Brechtian critique of illusionist art and the anti-illusionism of the structural materialists and other modernist filmmakers: while Brecht proposes to go "beyond a critique of illusionism in order to engage in an analysis and transformation of the real," many of the modernist directors "engage in a constant critique of illusionism, which is much the same thing as a permanent meditation on the nature of art."[47] Harvey warns that certain formal anti-illusionist devices of modernist "counter-cinema" have been reified as "*essentially* more adequate to the representation of social reality than the devices drawn from those styles labelled 'realist' or 'naturalist.' "[48] A main cinematic tic of this formalist reading of Brecht is the frontal address, which professes truth simply by shifting from obliqueness to frontality, from avoiding to confronting the spectator's gaze.

In "Les Deux Regards," his essay on camera address, Pascal Bonitzer analyzes Brechtian cinema's dangerous border with what he calls *brecht-isme:* it is sufficient that the "author believes himself in possession of sufficient knowledge about the spectator position and is satisfied in exercising this supposed knowledge"[49] for the work to fall victim to the stalemate of proselitism. For Bonitzer, Godard's *Wind from the East,* as well as Straub and Huillet's work, falls into this trap. Filmmaker Peter Gidal attacks another staple of *brechtisme,* the theme of reflexivity, from a different perspective: certain modalities of anti-illusionism are caught in the web of transparency. "The use of the film medium as transparent, invisible, is exactly the same when the object being documented is 'some real event,' some 'film procedure,' some 'story,' etc."[50] Discussing structural materialist film, Gidal defends a nonillusionistic practice that "deals with," instead of "representing," the "demystification of the film process."[51] But his fierce attack on any remnant of symbolic meaning and the fastidiously antirepresentational, antinarrative thrust of his rhetoric define his idealism as a mere inversion of *brechtisme,* since ultimately he seems to believe in a realm outside representation. The debate about the reification of Brecht's techniques demarcates, as its supplement, the new narrative directions taken by, for instance, Peter Handke's film *The Left-Handed Woman* (1978) and Akerman's work; these narratives incorporate critical distanciation without proselytism.

The shift away from an authoritarian *brechtisme* parallels the post-'68 discrediting of the intellectual as representative of the people, the avoidance, in short, of the position of "master of discourse." Akerman's refusal to mediate between herself and others from *within the film* is compounded by her discourse of excess, which establishes the separateness and independence of the audience: "I cannot but leave a place for the spectator in his/her difference,"[52] says Akerman. Seemingly democratizing reception (as Bazin does in advocating the long take), the hyperbolically homogeneous texture of Akerman's cinema makes it impossible to forget one's condition as spectator.

Another way to understand the post-Godardian cinema is to consider Akerman's affinities with her contemporaries. Wim Wenders, for example, looks to Warhol and Ozu as models for his descriptive narratives;[53] his first short films are basically structural exercises that allow a phenomenological attention to the real. Their Warholesque camera fixity, their duration, their seriality, and their use of film loops delineate the shift from a juxtapositional model (Godardian, Brechtian) toward another mode of distanciation—one that explicitly acts on the spectator's attention through

duration, and that comprises a narrative based on linearity and a new, deflected dramaturgy.

At stake in this post-Godardian sensibility is the need to deal differently with the referent. A problematized linearity of episodes or ellipses and a preference for obliquity over frontality in mise-en-scène, replace the direct questioning of cinematic language and the direct address of the audience. Akerman's mise-en-scènes clearly opt out of direct address. One recalls the invisible fourth wall in the frontal framing of Jeanne's and Anna's solitary activities and the semifrontal single-shot compositions of the dialogues in *Meetings with Anna,* which seem to challenge the characters' involvement in the scene. Akerman's characters seem suspended between absorption within the scene and a theatrical awareness of the audience. Akerman's characters may face the camera without addressing it, as in *Meetings with Anna* and *Jeanne Dielman,* and in this frontality one might, superficially, recognize the operations of theater—a prosceniumlike shot or a stagelike posture. More importantly Akerman's hyperbolic strategies— concerning verbal address and duration—include an excess, in cinema, that is of a corporeal order.

Simultaneously engaging and defamiliarizing the spectator, Akerman's minimalism creates a distance that can only be characterized as "disquietingly theatrical."[54] At stake in the term "theatrical," both for minimal art (sculpture) and for cinema, is the cleavage between two presences that demand recognition at the same time: that of the spectator and that of the scene. These are related through conditions of separation or of familiarity that are, at each instant, absolute. And these two poles define a gravitational field in which the engagement with the represented scene parallels, but never erases, one's acknowledgment of one's own detachment from the scene.

To unbalance representation by rephrasing drama's old antitheses of naturalistic absorption and artifice means taking the Godardian frontal address askance. In the cinema of Bresson, Dreyer, Rohmer, Handke, Straub and Huillet, and Akerman, the self-absorption of characters as they speak and listen to one another is hyperbolized to the point where their delivery is transformed into an almost mechanical pathway for the text. In Dreyer's *Gertrud,* the speech of one character to another constantly goes beyond the addressee—"they talk past each other."[55] Verbal discourse is intensified, and the text hangs over the bodies as film music does.[56] "It is the first time," says Dreyer, "I've given so much importance to the word and this helped me find a new form between the theater and cinema."[57]

At crucial points in Rohmer's later films (*Full Moon in Paris* 1984),

characters face away from the characters they address. Under the narrative pretext of awkwardness (the morality of confession), these oblique addresses stage a *décalage* from cinematic naturalism. But their frontality does not integrate the audience in the film. Actually, Rohmer's mise-en-scène complements his argument that in film before the '60s, a poetic, literary dimension of discourse was unproblematically incorporated into film dialogue. During the '60s this "necessary" discourse was either ruled out entirely (as in cinema verité) or else relegated to bracketed commentaries by means of such devices as direct address to the camera and graphic supports. In the '70s, in reaction to these modes of bracketing, there was an inflation of the "true to life": phrases that were quite unnecessary in terms of information were included merely for an effect of reality. Rohmer rejects both the primacy of the necessary, in which speech becomes loftily unlike ordinary direct discourse, and the overinflation of verisimilitude. He advocates a cinema in which shifts in discourse are transcribed into dialogue verbatim.[58] This documentary form, a filming "book in hand," is a tactical maneuver to reinstall the novelistic, indirect discourse that naturalistic theater and cinema, in their search for verisimilitude, preclude. Rohmer's "impure cinema" challenges both the anti-illusionist indictment of spoken, natural discourse and the equation of truth with acted (Hollywood) or spontaneous (cinema verité) stutterings.

Like Rohmer, and like Dreyer in *Gertrud,* Akerman allows the text an importance that conventional naturalist cinema does not. It is the centrality of verbal address, its excessiveness and maldistribution, that produces the sense of theatricality in her films. One must understand this element of cinema mostly as signaling the recognition, indirect as it might seem, of the audience's presence; talking past each other, as well as relaying unnecessary dialogue, characters by default address the audience.

A question remains as to the relation between Akerman's American and European lineages—between her Warhol-like use of real-time representation and the treatment of text in Bresson, Rohmer, and Dreyer (as well as in '60's Rosselini, for instance). The European cinema briefly discussed above has always been credited as antinaturalistic; the forms through which this "theatre in concentrated form,"[59] as Dreyer called the "real talking film," creates a new corporeal and antiessentialist cinema still demand recognition. How, for instance, does the intensification of the discursive instance in this European cinema dislocate an "essential" fit between representation and referent? Is this dislocation somehow comparable to that produced through Warhol's extended duration?

Processes of layering in modernist realist cinema are most evident in the

adaptations of preexisting texts seen in the '60s cinema of Rossellini and of Straub and Huillet. There are affinities between these processes of inscription and the layering of minimal-hyperrealist films such as Warhol's and Akerman's that usually don't use a preexisting text.

In his analysis of Dreyer, Bordwell uses the term "theatricalization" to name the disparity between a base text and cinematic representation. "Since Brecht," he states, "we have realized that a production can criticize its source, but that may be only the extreme edge of a practice whereby a film can mark a certain distance from its text (a novel, play, script) by preserving a relative autonomy for its cinematic systems. I shall call this strategy 'theatricalization.' "[60] Two main ideas can be gleaned from this reading. The first is Bordwell's own formalist privileging of cinematic language, which he considers mainly in its visual register, paying little attention to the text and its delivery. In this regard, "theatricalization" is nothing but a replay of the idealist proscription of sound in early avant-garde cinema.[61] The second notion asserts that "in order for theatricalization to draw a distance between text and film, the text must be signalled as existing prior to the film."[62] This idea only problematizes the first: it describes cinematic language as secondary to the already textualized reality of a novel or play. Though Bordwell has in mind a spectator for whom knowledge of the base text only exacerbates notions of cinematic specificity, the issue of theatricalization raises a series of questions regarding the use of a twice-removed reality as one's referent.

This issue of inscription is first articulated in Bazin's "Theater and Cinema" (which Bordwell duly credits), where the adaptation of plays to the cinema is a main concern. Bazin makes clear that there are different ways of adapting a literary work; but a successful adaptation defines itself as adaptation (for example Olivier's *Henry V*), or else follows Jean Cocteau's *Les Parents Terribles* in exacerbating the feelings of claustrophobia and intimacy associated with the stage.[63] In another essay, Bazin's perceptive understanding of Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), an adaptation of Georges Bernanos's book, ultimately moves him to review what is meant by realism: "Bresson treats the novel as he does his characters. The novel is a cold, hard fact, a reality to be accepted as it stands. . . . in this case the reality is not the descriptive content . . . of the text—it is the very text itself, or more properly the style."[64] Bazin's concept of realism stretches to an interesting degree here: in this realism "one stage removed," the referent ceases to be reality, becoming another's text and style. As will become clear, this insight is relevant for Akerman's own layered processes of reference.

In yet another reading of Dreyer's work, James Schamus uses the term "textual realism" for the practice of authenticating one's version of the real through "an aesthetic practice based on documents."[65] The term can be applied not only to Dreyer's use of judicial records in *Joan of Arc* (1927–28) but also to the work of modernist realists such as Rossellini (*The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*), Straub and Huillet (*Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*), and Rohmer (*Marquise d'O,* 1976)—all led by the desire for (the textualized) real to inscribe text in the film.[66] The disparity between "theatricalization," with its degree of stylization, and "textual realism," which promises an authenticity verified by the real, suggests the referential complexity of adaptation. This complexity challenges both realist conventions (the reproduction of natural reality) and modernist postulates of medium specificity—the films seem by turn too literary and too theatrical.

Akerman does not use texts such as documents of Louis XIV, or novels like Kleist's *Marquise d'O,* from which to suggest distance. Yet her hyperboles—the extended length of her shots, her distended or compressed dialogues—do invoke an extra, material dimension of representation that is in important respects akin to the modernist, second-degree realism of Bresson, Rosselini, Dreyer, and Straub and Huillet. This European cinema proceeds through an intensification of discourse. It may incorporate indirect narratives (or at least literary qualities) into spoken discourse (*Pickpocket* 1959); it may stretch dialogue into an exchange of monologues (Straub and Huillet's *Othon* 1969, Rohmer's *Ma nuit chez Maude* 1969, *Meetings with Anna*); it may double gesture and speech (*Gertrud*) and play spoken against written word (*Diary of a Country Priest*). But with the important exception of Straub and Huillet's work, which sometimes juxtaposes heterogeneous filmic realities, this layered cinema works through an overall texture of homogeneity.

It is Bresson's work, however, that best clarifies the import of these intensifications for a decentering representation. His amplified diegetic sound is supposed to stand for the corresponding visual referent. Yet his work generates a redundance, a blocking of psychological interpretation, that resembles Akerman's effects: although he claims a higher adequacy between thought and expression,[67] his resistance to naturalist synchronization leads him to fold commentary over image, spoken over handwritten word, gesture over speech, always in slight anticipations or delays. What might have passed unnoticed, absorbed as "natural," creates instead a sense of repetition—one feels one has already seen certain images. In *Pickpocket,* Michel raises his finger as if searching for a direction. This gesture can only be read as the hailing of a cab in the next shot, yet it anchors,

perhaps unwittingly, the voice-over commentary, "I did not know where I was going." The gesture is split between meanings. The defamiliarizing effect of these strategies of redundance relates to Akerman's use of redundance (and literalness) to preempt interpretation.

The imposition of a dual register of reading on a single body creates a physicality that is of special interest in cinema. Bresson's conception of a repetition that becomes automatic, like a second nature, engenders, in its will for a pure cinema, a new form "between theatre and film." This assertion is not meant as a comment on Bresson's disparagement of theater and cinema.[68] His proposal of a reconstructed reality existing solely on screen suggests a fierce indisposition toward the notion of a reality to be enacted, a script to be followed—toward the idea of representation itself. Bresson seems to propose a presentational mode, one he knows cannot bypass repetition. Flat, economical, and exact, the performance of Bresson's models—his nonprofessional actors—subverts naturalism through the automatism proper to cinema (which transfers mechanical reproduction to bodies and gestures). Rather than a provocative comment aimed at a defender of "cinematography," the qualifier "between theatre and film" is directed to the complexity of Bresson's attempt to present radical uniqueness through mechanical reproduction.[69] In this new form, the filmic body as well as the performances are suffused by a sense of the mechanical, by an automaton quality resulting from massive stylization and from processes of textual inscription. In the cinema that interests us here, this quality is transferred onto characters and performers, and accounts for an awkwardness of rhythm (of movement and speech) that is distinctly other.

The corporeal cinema I have been describing operates through excess; the superimposition of literal and figurative registers, the redundance of the informational substratum (given verbally and visually), the imposition of multiple functions on a single body (of author and performer, actor and persona)—all create a positional disarray. The choice between seeing Chantal Akerman or the performer in *Je tu il elle*, Delphine Seyrig or Jeanne in *Jeanne Dielman*, or between hearing mother or daughter in *News from Home*, is not easily resolved. The alternatives are not displayed side by side or one after the other pedagogically—in the didactic effect of quotation and interruption proper to a juxtapositional aesthetic. In the next chapters we shall examine how Akerman's minimal hyperrealism not only upsets an essentialist reading of the image through its constantly flickering oscillation between literal and symbolic registers, but subverts notions of type, character, and author, creating a double register or internal disjunction in the representation of the subject.

# 3  THE EQUIVALENCE OF EVENTS

## *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce,*

## *1080 Bruxelles*

*Tragedy as a mechanism is based upon a calamitous persistence in one's ways.*
—Kenneth Burke[1]

*When she bangs the glass on the table and you think the milk might spill, that's as dramatic as the murder.*—Chantal Akerman, 1977[2]

*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* is a work about balance, a balance resulting from the film's structural precision as well as from an impetus toward quiescence and inertia in the diegesis. Akerman's minimal and hyperrealist style is deeply involved in this equilibrium. My concern here is to establish the link in the film between formal and thematic balance, investigating the effects of a "perfect" parity between the two. An investigation of Akerman's minimal hyperrealism necessarily involves an account of the excess generated by its all-too-perfect equilibrium.

Balance applies in the film's formal overinscription as well as in its thematics of an enforced stability. *Jeanne Dielman* follows a mandate of obsession compulsion, its balance construed through the guise of an overly ritualized presentation of household routines. The habits of a mother/ housewife and part-time prostitute and the shaping of her controlled order are matched by a cinematic structure consistent in both its display (of, for example, the scenes in which Jeanne cooks meals) and its elisions (of the sex scenes). As rigid as the character's own self-imposed chronology, this structure consists of a set of a priori decisions—about the camera's location

and height vis-à-vis the filmic event—that remains unchanged through most of the film.

The narrative structure of *Jeanne Dielman* is predicated on a formal and dramatic equivalence between major and minor events. Akerman uses literal time and a fixed frontal frame to depict actions merely hinted at in conventional feature films. We are shown the cooking and eating of every meal for three days, the washing of dishes, the making of beds, the taking of a bath. We observe Jeanne both following her meticulous routine and killing time. Most of the actions are followed in their entirety. When they are not, the repetitive nature of Jeanne's gestures suggests a mold to be imaginatively filled in by the spectator watching an action or event not fully shown the second time round (as, for instance, the second time Jeanne takes a bath, and so on). Akerman's refusal merely to indicate an action through some kind of synecdochal tag, reinforces one's sense of a quotidian routine of tasks carried on repeatedly and in full. The feeling of repetition, I would claim, is a well-orchestrated effect, since one in fact seldom sees any diegetic task performed in its entirety twice in the film. What we do see is the "interminable" of the scene: the full duration of a task and of a character's waiting.

By presenting unique instances of a gesture or event, and by stressing real-time representation, Akerman frustrates the abstracting nature of repetition—the suggestion of constant recurrence (every day, week, month). As a result of the indexical relations between photographic record and reality, real-time representation foregrounds the particularizing nature of the cinematic event. At the same time, Akerman exerts a precise, delicate economy: she systematically "subtracts" from specific scenes. This frugality is a matter not simply of available cinematic time but of the possibility of a newly constructed visibility: the film's hyperbolic focus on the quotidian, a focus we imagine as a literal rendition of the actions of the central character, is so extreme that for a long time into the film we overlook its cost—the partial or complete elision of scenes.

When focusing on Jeanne's cooking, the camera—with two important exceptions—is located facing the kitchen from the door, parallel to the kitchen sink and oven. It insistently faces a focal action point—table, oven, or sink. This obdurate fixity creates extreme lags of on-screen action, for one quickly learns that the action in a scene does not terminate when the character leaves the frame. This is, indeed, one of the film's first lessons: the camera will face the area of an action's start, even when this action moves off-frame or is elided. Akerman signals an impending cut by having Jeanne complete her tasks, move off-screen, and turn off the lights after

leaving the frame. There is a "post action lag of about six seconds before the cut."[3] On the other hand, the next shot always begins in medias res.

We also see Jeanne between spaces—in the corridor as she passes from bedroom to bathroom or from kitchen to living room. Akerman starts a sequence that could be titled "Getting Sylvian (Jeanne's son) Out to School" in the kitchen, but she also films Jeanne as she enters the living room, where her son is asleep, to turn on the heater and wake him up. The recording of Jeanne's trajectory inside the house is, as we shall see, as basic to the film as the shift from literal to fictional representation that occurs later on.

That Akerman's standardized procedures of setup and editing seem to follow Jeanne's logic and movements soon becomes one of the film's formal correlates, so that any disruption in the character's system can be represented by a concurrent rupture in the editing pattern. Most of the film is shot indoors, providing an additional means to maintain, through framing, the idea of order. The three walls of each room in which Jeanne moves, if not always present in the image, are nevertheless the spatial references that localize and frame her. At the same time, Akerman emphasizes a Renaissance perspectival composition through the use of symmetry and, through the low height (her own) of the camera, creates the illusion of diagonal lines converging on a central point within the frame.[4] This use of perspective qualifies Akerman's abstracting strategies as structural and narrative rather than visual and aural: her hyperrealism is characterized by a hypostasis of illusionist perspective and realist representation.

Throughout the film we are constantly reminded of other, more conventional ways of telling the same story. Akerman's parti pris is original: her twisting of narrative takes place through the selection and amplification of devices usually associated with conventional Hollywood narrative. She hyperbolizes perspective, linear chronology, ellipsis, and the naturalistic conventions of having single actors perform single characters. Insisting on, indeed amplifying narrative elements, Akerman defines a homogeneous texture that subverts the codes of cinematic transparency from within.[5]

Akerman's narrative is elliptical and stylistically rigorous. It makes sparse use of anecdotal detail. Her "litany of constricted forms—austere camera movement, tight grid of controlled spaces, minimum verbal communication counterpointed by heightened natural sounds"[6] constitutes an amplificatory tactic proper to what I have termed an "aesthetics of homogeneity."[7]

The frontal camera angles and the absence of reverse shots in *Jeanne*

*Dielman* are part of the assertiveness with which Akerman uses the representational image. The film's skewed frontality makes us ask, "Why doesn't Jeanne look at us [at the camera]?" This frontality defies the precise, ritualistic changes of camera angle that secure a sense of continuity in the classic cinematic/analytic pattern, but it also challenges the thrust of the direct address in many anti-illusionistic films.[8] Akerman explicates what analytic editing would mean in *Jeanne Dielman* when she explains why she discarded this form of cutting: "It was the only way to shoot that scene and to shoot that film. To avoid cutting the woman in a hundred pieces, . . . cutting the action in a hundred places, to look carefully and to be respectful."[9] In fact this narrative has a center whose distance from the object never changes: "You always know what point of view it is. It's always the same. . . . I didn't go too close, but I didn't go too far away. . . . It was not a neutral look, . . . but the camera was not voyeuristic in the commercial way because you always know where I am. You know it wasn't shot through the keyhole."[10] Akerman's extended naturalistic shots, at medium distance, modify both classic film narrative with its regulated alternation of shots and experimental film, where the concept of time could almost be a substitute for the image. In "Repetition Time," Stephen Heath discusses the specific process through which a structural materialist film denies narrative:[11] "The account given will be extremely subjective or extremely objective (towards a description of the filmic construction, the uses of repetition, camera mobility, etc.)."[12] Yet in *Jeanne Dielman,* and this is precisely the film's "difference," the idea of time ("objective") and the feeling of repetition ("subjective") are not proposed as substitutes for the flow of the narrative. The idea of time is indissolubly linked to Akerman's hyperrealism, adding to it a different perceptual demand.

The extension of time through a naturalistic image—the hyperrealist effect proposed—has as its utmost limit the question, "What am I doing here watching what this woman is doing?" The question implies not just a confusion between a naturalistic image and reality but the actual possibility of entering the fiction. It is the nature of the image that it seems to invite us to enter a diegetic process. Yet the kinds of correspondences that usually regulate the time of the narrative, of storytelling according to this or that dramatic effect, are not respected. As Akerman herself says, she uses duration as a presence rather than for mood (as she had done in her early film *L'Enfant aimé ou je joue à être une femme mariée* [The beloved child, or I play at being a married woman], 1971).[13] This difference is as

crucial in the film as Akerman's avoidance of reverse shots: it defines the separateness of director, spectator, and character.

*Jeanne Dielman* "objectifies" the character's and spectator's experience through its orchestration of repetition: the patterned cinematic structure, Jeanne's routine behavior, and the spectator's endurance in the face of boredom all constitute parallel yet distinct registers of sameness. This sameness negates the image, creating a form of abstractive blindness, which explains why one tends, in describing *Jeanne Dielman*, to mis-remember the complex and detailed map of Jeanne's routine. If we are to follow this narrative, we must modify our notions of repetition and nothingness. An eye attentive to change is the only possibility left: seeing and not seeing stand in this film as opposites corresponding respectively to, on the one hand, attention to sometimes minute changes (in the image and in events) and, on the other, to complete alienation.

This reconception of focus must extend not only to the dramatic content of the scenes (cooking, knitting, killing) but also to cinematic events, events pertaining to filmic texture and structure. Through extended dura-tion and fixed frame, the spectator experiences the profilmic event as an expansive materiality. The dishcloth, her apron, the weight of plates, the soup tureen on the dining table—all become heightened synesthetic foci.

The complicity between spectator and character, then, depends on an interplay between attention and inattention. And it is this interplay, fi-nally, that constructs the particular quality of perception and memory invoked by the work. One remembers each image and detail of *Jeanne Dielman* through Akerman's proposal of a seesaw movement: the impos-sibility of choosing one pole of reading—story—"against" the other, a lit-eral flow of time.

### Excess Description: Robbe-Grillet and Cinematic Hyperrealism

Akerman's use of both repetitive compositions and extended real-time shots raises questions about the destabilizing, supplementary effect of detailed description. The insistence on remaining with the scene even after its narrational or referential information has been decoded inevitably solicits an estranged experience of the image. The hyperattentiveness urged on the viewer by Akerman's extended takes in real time is reinforced by the fixity of camera setup and height. At the same time, this camera fixity exacts a qualification of, or at least a reflection on, the sort of atten-tion it commands: the camera's rigid stare directs our awareness to the

minutiae of the action, but as soon as Jeanne leaves the frame, the camera's fixed position discloses our attention as one utterly focused on the human presence.

Akerman's interest in Jeanne's presence has been likened to voyeurism.[14] But this interpretation is only possible if one assumes that the camera's fixed position is a strategy based on a (character-identified) limit: the impossibility of following the supposed object of attention—Jeanne—out of the frame. The fixity of the camera in *Jeanne Dielman,* however, is not confined to special situations; it restricts one's vision consistently. Besides, we have not been granted access to the diegesis through a point-of-view structure of camera shots. Our sole means of identification is with the camera. Indeed, the film is firm in its denial of identificatory processes.[15]

By reinforcing one's curiosity about human presence, Akerman ultimately discloses the anti-anthropomorphic thrust of hyperrealism. The fixity of the camera position is a self-limiting strategy that implicates the spectator beyond the play of identification. Its fixity represents a frame, the better to see what is shown—Jeanne, but also the table, the sink, the dishes.

The "traditional" scene is usually equated with human presence, or at least with its imminent appearance. In *Jeanne Dielman,* however, as the unwavering camera truncates or elides human bodies, it participates, from the very start, in an economy of excess and lack. When Jeanne leaves the frame, the camera's poised stare placates the curiosity for human presence through what visibly becomes a hyperreality. Displaced onto sets and objects, the camera's extended gaze enhances the effect of defamiliarization produced by Akerman's literal representations. Objects and spaces gain an effect of presence that is entirely devoid of metaphysical or symbolic significance. Akerman imposes a sense of gravity and physicality on both people and objects as they are anchored on screen. And as these images stimulate our awareness of the texture of domestic objects, it is as if we had gained an extrasensorial dimension. The difference between one fixity that restructures perception and emphasizes cinematic elements and another that redirects our curiosity to a missing presence might seem minor. But in *Jeanne Dielman,* the tension between these two possibilities allows a perceptual energy directed at the scene to be transfigured into a proto-narrative.

This anti-anthropomorphism in Akerman's stance, this descriptive thrust that equates objects and human beings, this sense first and foremost of things "being there" for one's attention, is shared with the creators of the *nouveau roman.* For Alain Robbe-Grillet, the indexical image can block

interpretation or metaphysical projection. In his essays he discusses how his supposedly "direct," and in a way limited, presentation of the referent is intended to counter significance. "Formal description," he says, "is above all a limitation: when it says 'parallelepiped,' it knows it achieves no Beyond, but at the same time it cuts short any possibility of seeking one."[16] Robbe-Grillet's strategic use of verbal description, based almost entirely on the visual sense, offsets any transcendental or psychological undertone.

What Roland Barthes, in his essay "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet," calls "formal description" provides striking analogies with Akerman's effects of literal representation, insofar as both approaches engage in a blockage of symbolic meaning: "The description of the object somehow exceeds its function . . . and at the very moment we expect the author's interest to lapse, having exhausted the object's instrumentality, that interest persists, . . . bringing the narrative to a sudden, untimely halt and transforming a simple implement into space."[17] Literalness, or the use of real-time action, is Akerman's cinematic equivalent of the description based on visuality that Barthes perceptively discerns in Robbe-Grillet's work. It is the way Robbe-Grillet leans on the visual sense that creates the effect of objecthood he desires.[18] As Barthes writes, "This preference for the visual enforces some curious consequences, the primary being that Robbe-Grillet's object is never drawn in third dimensions, in depth: . . . [it] has no being beyond phenomenon: it is not ambiguous, not allegorical, not even opaque."[19] Considering Robbe-Grillet's and Akerman's medium-specific modes of objectification, it is important to emphasize their shared antipsychological thrust. Both Robbe-Grillet's literature and Akerman's cinematic hyperrealism are constructed upon selected reductions and amplifications. Robbe-Grillet's project of using qualifiers and nouns relating solely to the visual sense is echoed in Akerman's films through the device of extended duration—a device reflecting a phenomenological understanding that relies on the hyperbolic foregrounding of one specific sense. However, although Akerman intimates, as it were, an extra dimension through her hyperbolic reductions, the supplement produced through these concerted restrictions is radically antimetaphysical, as it is with Robbe-Grillet.

The emphasis on the sense of sight is significantly related to the doubling of referentiality implicit in description. Conventionally, description is a form of language that stands merely as a recording—a sort of bypass of more elaborate processes of signification. It is a mode of expression, then, that doubles the work of reference implicit in language itself. In a visual

medium such as film—and hence the importance of Robbe-Grillet's insistence on a description based on vision—this referentiality is the "natural" given of indexical representation. And as it is dwelt upon through description or duration, it can only yield an excess, one that belies, as hyperrealism does, the illusions of "objectiveness." Instead of using language in a patently connotative way, objective literature, literal art, and Akerman's minimal and hyperrealist cinema all insist on amplifying what is implicit in any indexical language: its rendering of a first, "immediate" meaning— its referent.

Yet through the unsettling effect of excess description, Akerman approaches an abstract concreteness that unbalances referentiality. There is a sort of metamorphosis: the sharpness of the depiction borders on the hallucinatory. Akerman's hyperrealist style crosses a certain threshold of intensity. An oscillation between recognizing the familiar and being estranged from it is one of the central features of *Jeanne Dielman*. This effect of making strange through representation is part of the hyperrealist aspect of Akerman's style: the extreme concentration on a certain set of images or gestures over an extended period of time leads to a basic questioning of the conventions sustaining the identity between reality and representation.[20] Distended temporality is inseparable from Akerman's particular brand of abstraction, from her hyperbolic indexicality.

The use of repetitive pattern in the film seems to imply an abstract category or tag. Yet the film's enhancement of the visual and aural senses frustrates a categorical grid, enforcing a nonconceptual modality of perception. Resisting a subsumption of repetition in an abstract notion (that, for instance, of calling the actions in *Jeanne Dielman* "housekeeping"), Akerman refuses to employ what Rosalind Krauss calls "the single example that would imply the whole" and opts instead for "accounts of events composed by a string of almost identical details connected by 'and.' "[21] Referring to the work of Sol LeWitt, Samuel Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet, Krauss names their proposals of concrete description and ateleological listing an "absurd nominalism." Of these works in general and that of LeWitt in particular she remarks,

> The experience of the work [LeWitt's *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes*] goes exactly counter to the 'look of thought. . . . whether diagrammatic or symbolic, [classical expressions of logic] are precisely about the capacity to . . . imply an expansion with only the first two or three terms, . . . to use, in short, the notion of etcetera.[22]

Krauss continues,

The babble of a LeWitt serial expansion . . . has the loquaciousness of the speech of children or of the very old, in that its refusal to summarize, to use the single example that would imply the whole, is like those feverish accounts of events composed of a string of almost identical details connected by "and."[23]

Krauss's analysis points to the kind of dissolution of synthetic formulations that critics have also found in Robert Morris's minimalism and Robbe-Grillet's literature. In a more general way, Akerman's avoidance of abstractive processes also defines some of the strategies of "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*) proposed by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky. For Shklovsky, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known . . . to make the stone stony."[24] Thus he proposes making the familiar strange by not naming the thing known—proposes the replacement of its name by concrete description. Art, he says, is characterized by such evasion, which reflects an attempt to counter a process of perception that has become automatic—an "algebraic method of thought" where one apprehends "objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions," where one knows the object "by its configuration" but sees "only its silhouette."[25] Here we find one of the recurrent themes explored at the intersection of phenomenology and modernism.[26] This is the compass point by which Akerman's work steers: it is a matter of substituting the knowledge of an object for a "vision" of it, calling attention to its materiality through a "roughening" of its language.

Still, when one analyzes Akerman's use of real-time representation as a reflexive strategy, one finds that its effects far surpass a simple calling of attention to the stoniness of the stone. Literal rendition of events undoubtedly creates a "roughened" cinematic texture, but what matters in *Jeanne Dielman* is the specific dimension of Akerman's "making strange." What demands address is the connection between the enhanced cinematic materiality of her work and the thematics of automatism and obsession compulsion that run through it.

### Bracketing Drama: The Other Scene

If I have insisted until now on a reading of *Jeanne Dielman* based on the defamiliarizing effect of duration, I should also say that the film's narrative is not composed completely of extended shots of housekeeping. There are indeed many such scenes shown in their entirety: Jeanne making her bed, laying a white towel carefully at the bed's center, waiting at the post office,

buttoning her robe, folding her son's pajamas. There are also the extended dialogues-qua-monologues. But, some of these scenes are presented to us a second time; these "repeats" are usually cut so that they begin in medias res, leaving it to our memories to provide the full action out of what we have just seen forty or fifty minutes earlier. And besides these partially elided scenes—which, given our memory of a recent, similar scene, work as complete sequences—*Jeanne Dielman* presents complete, almost comical elisions, such as Jeanne's walk around the block with her son after dinner. The two figures leave along one side of the street; they vanish in the dark; the camera shifts to face down the street in the other direction; they reappear from the dark and reenter the building—the entire sequence taking something less than thirty seconds.

In addition, a series of very short shots punctuates the long takes of the household and lets us see, though only barely, the clients Jeanne receives every afternoon. Though there are other ellipses in the film, these are its most significant. As Jeanne receives her clients, the camera's low height truncates their bodies. The camera is positioned by the apartment door with the bedroom door in the background; one sees Jeanne's body from her chin down, taking the customers' coats and hats. The truncation of the frame is so extreme that we can see the men's (and Jeanne's) full upper contour only as they follow Jeanne toward the bedroom door.

The fixity of this framing is obstinate. Throughout the film, the camera's stare marks a refusal to give the characters centrality. This same refusal defines the subtractive gesture that sets up Akerman's elisions of the scenes inside the bedroom. For between those moments by the apartment door—as she receives first the client, then later his money—another door is of central importance: the door of the bedroom, which Jeanne approaches with the client. They enter, and he closes it after him. The camera remains facing the corridor and the door. Two seconds later the light gets darker abruptly, in a faux jump cut that marks the passage to a later moment: Jeanne opens the bedroom door and leaves with the customer. The ellipsis is diegetically justified, with the natural passage of time—the period from late afternoon to early evening—implied by the difference of light within the shot. Thus it is only the suddenness of the shift from lighter to darker that in any way produces the effect of ellipsis.

This shift in "time," moreover, is effected simply by switching off the set lights. Actually a switching off of lights pervades the film: Jeanne has a mania for turning off the lights before she leaves any room, even if she is leaving for just a few moments. The perversion of the "naturalness" of filmic conventions in these temporal ellipses is therefore double. First,

there is a refusal of the gradual passage of time usually connoted by the cinematic ellipsis—Akerman's ellipses are abruptly performed rather than evoked. At the same time, the turning off and on of lights has already been introduced through Jeanne's obsessiveness and frugality, so that the artifice of Akerman's ellipsis is naturalized—we are already acclimatized to these switches of light. We have come to see them as normal. Yet it is only Jeanne's borderline behavior—her naturalness runs mechanically—that allows such a perfect, and radical, perversion of cinematic naturalism on Akerman's part.

The bedroom scenes that would provide a literal, continuous temporality for these episodes are elided. The ellipses are basic to Akerman's non-totalist bent in cinematic representation. For she does not mask the fact that she is suppressing the bedroom scenes—she actually displays it, with mastery and purpose. The stubborn linearity and homogeneity of Akerman's treatment of every scene allows these unseen scenes to fuse with those of the housekeeping routines. Through this homogeneous texture, Akerman construes an equivalence of events: among her other routine housekeeping chores, Jeanne hides the signs of prostitution. This diegetic indifferentiation is further reinforced by the similarly matter-of-fact way in which the filmmaker treats both the prostitution episodes and the cooking chores.

Actually Akerman's elisions parallel Jeanne's own concealments, adding to the effect of order that Jeanne tries to impose on her life. Cleaning and hiding here stand for each other in perfect homology. This hiding, though neutralized—mingled with the peeling of potatoes and the babysitting—is recorded and shown. Still, through the manner in which she shows Jeanne hiding, Akerman builds a peculiar complicity with the character. We are led both to sense and immediately to forget that these men, doors, and money represent a major possibility of rupture in Jeanne's routine. This forgetting is encouraged through the way their presence naturally and rapidly gives way to other "nondramatic" events, shown in long take. When Jeanne carefully puts away the money she has earned in the soup tureen that sits at the center of the table, midway between bedroom and kitchen, for example, this gesture takes its place among the long and detailed shots of the home routine.

*Jeanne Dielman* can be perceived as creating a complicity between narrative procedures and narrated acts and gestures. Akerman shows her empathy toward Jeanne's story by neutralizing the importance, in the hierarchy of spectacle, of the fictive obscenity in relation to "minor" housekeeping events. Little by little, this complicity is made apparent, poised as

Jeanne carries the pot of burned potatoes, Delphine Seyrig in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of New Yorker Films.

it is on unstable ground. The starting point of this imbalance is the rupture of the homology that had unproblematically correlated narrative and story levels: on the one hand, the order and repetition of housekeeping tasks shown in long take, on the other, flashes of very short scenes, vestiges, that cover up what is "out of scene"—the obscene.

When Jeanne closes the door after a client, her hair is tousled and the potatoes have burned. The event, dramatically minimized, that stands elliptically between closed doors pushes into the long take, disrupting its order. It is here that the film shifts its course. After the first link is established between Jeanne's disheveled hair (the obscene) and the burned potatoes (the scene), there is no way back. This connection is signaled by the first major change in camera position: for the first time, the camera stands by the oven, facing the door. It lingers there for a few seconds before Jeanne opens the door. Distraught, she stops, leaves the kitchen, goes into the corridor, stops again, and returns. And as the camera reverts to its original position, filming from the door into the kitchen, Jeanne starts one of cinema's greatest choreographies of displaced anxiety: she doesn't know what to do with (the fact of) the burned potatoes.

It is also at this point that the system of editing is deranged. Through the first half of the film, Akerman establishes a sequence of allowing Jeanne to finish her activities, leave the frame, and turn off the light before the director cuts to another shot. Here, instead, Akerman cuts in medias res, while

Jeanne is still in the kitchen and moving toward the door. From this entrance to the kitchen on, all of her obsessive order runs amok. She will later open the bedroom window before turning on the lights, and she wanders into and out of the bathroom twice, all the while holding the pot of potatoes, undecided as to what to do with this evidence of misconduct. In Jeanne's logic, the burned potatoes cannot be turned into mashed potatoes: the evidence must disappear completely, leaving no residue. And the menu must be restored as initially planned.

After this scene in *Jeanne Dielman,* all the activities to follow are played out as lacking in precision in relation to the way they were performed earlier on, during the first and second days of the film's action. The perverse notion of balance in *Jeanne Dielman* is given away by the fact that this scene bisects the film in two halves. Exactly ninety-five minutes into its run, the film starts almost paradigmatically to display every routine action as potentially faulty. On the third day, a tragicomic roster of hesitations emerges. These hesitations bear direct relation to a particular time: Jeanne constantly checks to see what time it is, confirming the fact that she has started to perform her activities earlier and has lost her habitual precision.

The pervasion of the scene by what is outside the scene, and the subsequent disruptions of the order that Jeanne has established in her routine, are not felt as a sudden inflection, though they bring about a change in the process of addressing the spectator. It is exactly when our attention has become in a sense trained to distinguish minor differences in the "sameness of the scene" that we are answered on a diegetic level, that ruptures start to show in the hitherto carefully constructed and untroubled analogy between filmic structure and story. Yet after the initial sequence, with the burned potatoes, where the system falters along with Jeanne, the camera maintains its center. With one important exception—when Jeanne goes into the kitchen for scissors to open a gift she has received, the camera position is similar to that when she finds the burned potatoes—neither the framing nor the editing pattern changes in the subsequent scenes. This uniformity allows us to perceive, in the profilmic, the sign itself of alteration. We become aware of the passion that might exist under Jeanne's calm expression, and we retrospectively start to read this seemingly unchanged expression as reflecting the growing anguish of silence.

The keyhole view that Chantal Akerman denies us is a displaced presence in this film. The extended duration of the shots no longer points to a nondramatic action but starts to function as the locus par excellence of the drama's eruption.

For the first two hours, all in *Jeanne Dielman* is startling order. This rigor supports a comparison of the film's structure to a game of "What is wrong with this picture?" The rhyming of formal and structural tone with the profilmic event in *Jeanne Dielman* is akin to the strategic engagement of the spectator's expectations in structural film. As minimal art, structural film reduces the number of elements involved in its scrutiny. Structural film offers a paradigm (formal repetition, seriality, etc.) through which the viewer can reconstruct its governing system, and in a way predict its "narrative"; it thus invites one to read the development of the film as a "natural" sequence of events, as an organic match between profilmic and cinematic orders. The interplay between recognizing the utter arbitrariness of this sequencing and noticing that which might break its expected pattern is a basic component of the structural film's vocabulary and intention.[27]

Akerman sets a formal and a behavioral paradigm only the better to expose its underside. The narrative is predicated on the difference between the first two days and the third day of Jeanne's routine. In its didactic exposure of the fragility of order, this discrepancy implies a moral tale: a fork falls, dishes remain sudsy, the brush flies as Jeanne shines the shoes, and she arrives either too early or too late to each of her routine stations. Objects seem animistically fraught, with a will of their own, and time, Jeanne's motor, starts being felt (by her and by us) as the reverse and constitutive side of boredom: as impatience and anguish.

It is on the third day that, because of an initial derangement of Jeanne's chronology (she wakes before her alarm clock rings), we see her sit apathetically at the kitchen table, then suddenly go to the back balcony, pick up a broom, leave it, and return to the chair. She stands up again, taking some coffee from the thermos bottle. She pours in some milk, and . . . the coffee tastes bad. She tastes the milk, brings out the sugar, carefully choosing perfect cubes which she joins symmetrically in a tiny rectangle before putting them in her drink—and the coffee still tastes bad. Then she starts making more coffee from scratch. Her apathy is given a purpose—to wait for the coffee to seep slowly through the Melita filter. Thierry de Duve has described this figuration of time—the water seeping through a domestic apparatus shaped rather like an hourglass—as a representation of one of the temporalities administered by Jeanne and by Akerman. Providing a metaphoric level for all the film's scenes in real time, the Melita coffee scene constitutes an image of "time as entropy, as irreversibility."[28]

The extra activity does not rebalance Jeanne's chronology. She sits in an old mustard-colored armchair, taking its shape and faded tone, only

Duration in *Jeanne Dielman:* Coffee filter as hourglass, Delphine Seyrig in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Frame enlargement, courtesy of New Yorker Films.

breathing. It is on the third day of the film's narrative that we watch Jeanne sit for long periods of time, doing nothing, then abruptly standing, or doing something unnecessary (like cleaning the bibelots) or unusual (like trying to play with the neighbor's baby, who normally sits alone as Jeanne has her snack). If, at a certain point in the film, we begin to suspect a change in the pace of what we've been watching for two and a half hours, this has to do with the introduction of signs of anxiety, shots where the action is in "disaster mode." In *Jeanne Dielman,* the disruptions in the scene are relatively small; they could be analogues for the images that classic analytic editing would privilege, through cutaways and close-ups, as suggestions of something about to happen.

Nevertheless, in showing all of Jeanne's vicissitudes—small disasters such as a falling fork, the loss of her usual coffee time, a baby howling—in an unchanged medium long shot, Akerman fixes these signs in the present time of their dramatic and material repercussions. Such mishaps are not to be read as forebodings, then, although they eventually function this way. To the extent that they are dramatic, it is through their actual noise and visual disturbance. The unease is felt through the disruption of the pace of the earlier scenes, with their untroubled movement (for the spectator) and domestic order (for Jeanne). The fact that *Jeanne Dielman* involves the spectator's attention in what in the hierarchy of spectacle is a minor her-

meneutic chain leads more to the viewing of what is happening than to the prospect of what will happen. Although we have learned to decode Jeanne's routine, and thus know what to expect in the order of events, Akerman's episodic narrative structure holds surprises having nothing to do with the notion of a turn of events. One adjusts very slowly to the fact that the irruption of differences holds the promise of some dramatic change. In *Jeanne Dielman,* the suspension of expectation generates another kind of suspense: the film experiments with the possibility of an attention to silence, blankness, and minor events but not as either a sign of some form of asceticism (a moralistic standpoint against traditional narrative, for example) or the absolute precondition for or even announcement of drama (like the stillness that reinforces the suspense of a thriller). *Jeanne Dielman* constitutes a radical experiment with being undramatic and, paradoxically, with drama's absolute necessity.

### The Murder, and, and, and . . . : An Aesthetics of Homogeneity

*Inertia. It is precise that "events take place."—*Michael Snow, 1967[29]

*The scene in its duration charges itself like an electric condenser as it progresses and must be kept carefully insulated against all parasitic contacts until a sufficient dramatic voltage has been reached, which produces the spark that all the action has been directed toward.—*André Bazin on *The Magnificent Amberson's* kitchen scene[30]

"No longer write about people's lives," Jean-Luc Godard says in *Pierrot le Fou,* through Jean-Paul Belmondo, "but only [about] what goes on between people in space . . . like colors and sounds."[31] Snow's work, the other major influence on Akerman's films, adds another level to Godard's phenomenological approach.[32] He says of his film *Wavelength* (1967) that it

> attempts to be . . . a "balancing" of different orders, classes of events, protagonists. The image of the yellow chair has as much value in its own world as the girl closing the window. The film events are not hierarchical but are chosen from a kind of scale of mobility that runs from pure light events, the various perceptions of the room, to the images of moving human beings.[33]

The documentary, and hence historical, element in structural film was noticed as early as Manny Farber's 1970 description of *Wavelength* as "a straightforward document of a room in which a dozen businesses have

lived and gone bankrupt."[34] The notion of a narrative in embryo contained in Farber's phrase is given fuller extension in Annette Michelson's 1971 essay "Toward Snow," a concerted gesture toward reinscribing the question of narrative within independent, structural film:

> As the camera continues to move . . . forward, building a tension that grows in direct ratio to the reduction of the field, we recognize . . . those horizons as defining the contours of narrative, of that narrative form animated by distended temporality turning upon cognition toward revelation.[35]

*Wavelength's* camera movement of progressive revelation, which Michelson reads as a sort of epitomization of a suspense narrative, constitutes the perspective proper to a phenomenological "reduction of field." A protracted zoom and an extension of the visual field over a precise fixed focus shape the film. The shot affords a hyperbole of indexical information; it also affords a cumulative intensification that is structurally analogous to the teleological movement of narrative.

In considering the potential connections between structural format and narrative processes, one might ask at what point an event should be considered dramatic within structural film, and whether intensity can in itself constitute drama. The literature of structural film refers constantly to external contingency as the "other" to the impassive camera. P. Adams Sitney points to dawn as the "one exterior event that does leak in" to Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970);[36] Stephen Koch points out an easy-to-miss event in Warhol's *Empire* (1964), the moment at dusk when the lights of the Empire State Building's top thirty floors are turned on.[37] At a certain moment in both these films, what has so far been seen as a natural progression breaks into a sign, a difference.

There is an affinity between this difference and the climactic moment of drama. If we look for this affinity within the context of minimalist art, we find it referenced in an epigrammatic scene presented by Robert Morris in 1961. Krauss describes this performance as follows:

> The curtain parts. In the center of the stage is a column, standing upright, eight feet high. . . . Nothing else is on the stage. For three and a half minutes nothing happens; no one enters or leaves. Suddenly the column falls, three and a half minutes elapse. The curtain closes.[38]

The ironic display of the presence effect of literal sculpture, here evinced as theater, is also manifested, though differently, in structural film. The performance element sought in structural film—the seepage of the exhibi-

tion context onto the text, and vice versa (the flicker effect, the sound of the projector, light particles, the addition of dust and scratches to the film)—is given an extra turn in Snow's work: the performance situation is acknowledged, in much the same way that Morris pulls the curtain to "communicate" conventional drama. Snow recognizes and incorporates the single element relegated backstage in the performances of structural-minimalist film: dramatic content. He stages instances of contingency as fragments of a would-be plot.[39]

In Snow's work, human events hint at narrative in episodic spurts without ever embracing continuity or motivation. The explicitly simulated fight shown in the afternoon party in *Back and Forth* (1969) cues the rest of the activities in the film as posed events. The performances in *Back and Forth* lack density and are not to be measured against naturalistic conventions. Their consistent rarefaction (mock violence, posed gestures) is construed in opposition to the marked physicality and resolute rhythm of the camera. As Snow states, "Oppositions are drama."[40]

Snow gives his narrative semblances quite strong connotations as allusions. The very sparseness of narrative markers in the scene reveals the specific role that narrative assumes in his aesthetic.[41] The fact that narrative in its phenomenological and structural aspects is so strong in Snow's work shows that, for him, the use of narrative mementos functions as a counterpoint to the cinematic transformations in the body of the film, illustrating in an expository manner the equivalence of figurative and literal orders suggested in his statements. Snow's work is relevant here, however, mainly as a means to rethink the relations between the narrative memento constituted by the episodic (the various human occurrences in *Back and Forth* and in *Wavelength*) and a narrative intensity resulting from a structural insistence in a single direction (the zoom and the intensification of sound in *Wavelength*, the syncopated speeding in *Back and Forth*).[42]

From *Hotel Monterey* (1972) to *Jeanne Dielman*, these two kinds of narrative (one made up of the episodic or discrete event, the other based on accumulation or structural intensification) are articulated as equivalent in Akerman's work. Episodic, discrete events such as the orgasm, the murder, and even the disturbances in Jeanne's routine are dedramatized. Dramatic expectation is built up simultaneously with a distanciation created through the use of extended real-time shots. Illusion and fact are made equivalent. They are, however, both redirected within a different sort of (predetermined) narrative. Akerman gears the literal shots of Jeanne's routine so that they have a cumulative force, and indeed move toward a narra-

tive climax pertaining to an entirely different, because fictional, register—that of the murder scene. The murder scene makes clear the traversal of two distinct temporalities: one, the linear direction of the narrative, its irreversibility in real time (the seeping of coffee through a filter, for example, is a structuring image in this mode); the other, a temporality that corresponds to the episodic events in the film, those instances that let one foresee a change of course and fate, the timid workings of drama.

Both Akerman and Snow use a death scene as the main event that stands in for the figurative order of narrative. One should, however, distinguish between the stakes of the representation of death in each of these filmmakers' work. A comparison with Godard is in order here. In *Breathless* (1959), for instance, Godard presents Michel's death as the director's reluctant compliance with the mandates of closure in classical narrative: even before Belmondo "decides" to die, the claim that simulation is intrinsic to the representation of death has already been made. Then, through a protracted choreography of fall in long take, the camera tracks Belmondo's body from a distance, framing and enhancing the spastic movements of his spectacular run. This shot creates an inspired homage to the artifices of cinematic performance.[43]

This is precisely the sort of death that Snow demands in *Wavelength*. Death here is a stylized event and comes, as it were, from a different and generic narrative space (that of film noir, for instance); Hollis Frampton's fall after dying contributes to a great lineage of stylized performances of death in cinema. But then the camera does not stop at the dead body but proceeds unblinkingly over it. The scene as a whole purports to be a signifier of nothing more than narrative per se. Thus the presentation of death ironically twists the significance of anti-illusionistic gestures of allusion: while Godard sets up a process of intertextuality that refers to specific filmic texts, Snow's film transforms narrative (with its hints of plot motivation) explicitly into the other of a structural project—a matter of alter-textuality.

In *Jeanne Dielman* the murder scene is crucial in more than one way. First of all it clarifies what a hyperrealist narrative might be. In the film's system, it is the murder scene that displays the highest degree of fictiveness; in doing so, it sets off the fictional element latent within the literalness of the domestic scenes—it foregrounds, in other words, the fictional and illusionary aspect of all the images. Since violent death is complicit with the very arbitrariness of fictional narrative,[44] Akerman's use of a narrative cliché activates, as it were, a second layer dormant under her narrative of domesticity.

The notion of the cliché is helpful in understanding the subversive powers of cinematic hyperrealism, its peculiar sandwiching of literalness and representation. Suggesting a condensation of thematic redundance and serial reproduction, the term "cliché" refers to a platitude, a phrase flattened out by repeated use. In its original meaning, it referred to a matrix for serial graphic reproduction. The layering of repetition and actuality invoked by a cliché indicates its social range: a cliché is inevitably involved with the prior resonances of a given form or representation. The fact that a specific phrase or mode can still communicate through and despite its redundance speaks of the cliché's force. Its potential effectiveness in film lies in the recognition of the difference that the cliché can still meaningfully suggest.

*Jeanne Dielman* continuously evokes the feeling that its narrative spreads over, selects, and recombines elements of another, fully constituted narrative. The film seems to stretch over a conventional narrative and to displace its melodramatic affect, otherwise conspicuously absent, into banal and mundane gestures.[45] At times, an action like brushing shoes, or waiting for water to boil for coffee, seems to take on the dramatic intensity of one of those incidents in a '40s Hollywood melodrama when someone slaps someone's face or waits anxiously for a lover. (Jeanne's playing with the baby, on the other hand, hovers between comedy and horror film.) It is as if Akerman, instead of reproducing a charged image (of a Campbell's soup can, say, or of the Empire State Building)—instead, even, of making references to narrative events from other film work (the kind of reference constituted by Godard's pop gesture in *Alphaville,* 1966)—had incorporated stretches of classical narrative at the basis of her own modified drama.

The film's narrative setup—a widow, living with her adolescent son, works in the afternoons as a prostitute taking clients in her home—and dialogues are blatantly founded on the absence of the father. Sylvain explicitly mentions his desire to defend his mother from his father's fiery sword (hurtful penis), indicating an oedipal scenario that the film exposes almost as if to dispose of it, be done with it, before going into the heart of another narrative, one whose texture is provided through Jeanne's solitary dealings. I will discuss this form of distributing information in more detail in the sixth chapter. For the moment, however, the particular quality of Akerman's process of allusion may in part be accounted for by the way she brackets the psychoanalytic references that inform her film and still makes them work to energize her drama.

The invocation of a second layer of meaning is constantly present in the

film and, psychologically interpreted, represents the unconscious, which surfaces through lapses and breakdowns. Without entirely discarding this meaning, I would like to consider this second layer first of all as a symptom of a repression with definite ideological implications. One can better understand the direction of this representation of repression if one takes the domestic movie melodrama as the main matrix for Akerman's hyperrealist narrative.

The family melodrama, aimed at a female audience, is Akerman's generic cliché, understood as the already loaded basis for her narrative transmutations. A shared trait between melodrama and *Jeanne Dielman* is the hint of a specifically gendered psychological pressure (which, however, is left unexpressed in Akerman's radically nonpsychological representations). This psychological pressure has social correlates; indeed, the subversive potential of melodrama lies in the genre's emphasis on "an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces directed oppressingly inward."[46] As Linda Williams rightly claims, "Rather than raging against a fate that the audience has learned to accept [as in tragedy], the female hero [in melodrama] often accepts a fate that the audience at least partially questions."[47] The melodrama, then, becomes an indirect indictment of social pressures.

Given its formal resolution, *Jeanne Dielman* could best be described as at most a distant relative of the domestic melodrama. But the setting and scenario, the emphasis on inertia and social paralysis, and mostly the undercurrent of sexuality, stated even as it is repressed, all allow Akerman to flesh out some of the melodrama's premises. Akerman and the directors of melodrama share a desire to exact an understanding of social determinants, an outcome paradoxically dependent on their narrow focus on individual crisis. The resolute refusal in the melodrama to state a problem in any terms other than those of emotional and familial conflicts is magnified in Akerman's film by her intensification of interest both in the individual and in a nonpsychological representation.

*Jeanne Dielman* disallows a realist reading—where the stratum beneath the surface would stand for an essential, repressed event. It borrows its intensity from the memory of conventional melodrama and of that genre's emotional outbursts (and repressions). It directs this energy toward an alternative character construction. Provisionally, however, I would like to link this energy to the notion of a singular pathology, an energy that moves the character's actions in a realm both social and private. Neither of these realms, however, is the sole cause of those actions.

In a filmic treatment as literal and devoid of psychology as that of *Jeanne*

*Dielman*, the sense of a double reference is triggered mostly because the film resorts to an actual narrative cliché—the "climax" represented by the murder. This "climax" forces us to rethink the status of such a scene, since the film otherwise seems to preclude traditional fictional strategies. It is by including this scene at all that Akerman creates the sense of a doubly layered narrative. Yet she shoots the murder scene in *Jeanne Dielman* in such a way as to derange a conventional dramatic hierarchy.

For the first time in the film, we get to watch the bedroom scene. Jeanne sits at her dresser, unbuttons her blouse, and carefully folds it. The following shot shows us her orgasm—from a slightly higher angle but still in a medium long shot. Next we are shown Jeanne in her initial position at the dresser, this time buttoning her blouse, while the john, a man with Arabic features, looks at her as if slightly puzzled, then lies back on the bed. In the mirror—which takes up the entire picture frame except for the bottom, where the lower part of the dresser appears—we watch Jeanne getting dressed. Her eyes lowered, she tucks her blouse into her skirt; she looks down, then stands up, still smoothing her skirt, and in a continuum from this gesture her hand goes from her skirt to the scissors, which are lying on the dresser. She picks them up and leaves the frame. Seconds later she reappears, falling with all her weight on the man and sticking the scissors into his neck. Then she removes them from his body and again leaves the frame. As she passes unseen, she replaces the scissors on the dresser.

The tension between what we understand the action to mean and the purposive continuity of Jeanne's movement from getting dressed to murder makes this scene remarkable. At this downplayed "climax," Akerman inverts the valences of temporality operative in her film: the necessary yet potentially reversible design of tragedy, and the irreversible temporality of real time.

The film's murder scene is a powerful example of the subtle dislocations that Akerman effects within an overall textural homogeneity. By incor-

Jeanne smoothes her shirt, Delphine Seyrig in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of New Yorker Films.
Jeanne picks up the scissors, Delphine Seyrig in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of New Yorker Films.
Jeanne stabs the john with the scissors, Delphine Seyrig in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of New Yorker Films.

porating this obviously fictional scene in a film marked by literalness, she doubles the arbitrariness suggested by the act of murder. Two different registers—literal and fictional—are joined, made equivalent, but there is no apparent break in the film's cohesive texture or narrative consistency. Up until the murder scene, everything that happens is literally done as well as enacted. Indeed, the distinction between a literal gesture and a performance is canceled by the nature of the actions shown: as Jeanne peels potatoes and washes the dishes, the potatoes get peeled and the dishes get clean. At the same time that the orgasm and the murder are dramatically downplayed, then, they present the "obscenity" within the film system as being first and foremost founded on the leap from presentation to representation.[48] It is the surface equivalence between literal task activities and a nonspectacular orgasm and murder that makes for the disturbance the scene provokes. Even though the sequence of events seems justifiable in terms of content, the formal equality that the film proposes in the representations of cooking and of murdering smoothly but irrevocably upsets the apparently seamless causality of this narrative, its apparently homogeneous texture.

The arbitrariness in this shift between literal and fictional registers constitutes the film's major subversion. (I will return later to the locus of this subversion—to the scene of the crime.) Still, this shift cannot fully account for the film's disquieting quality. As Judith Mayne suggests, "There may not be an exact and identifiable cause for the murder of Jeanne's client, but the threat of randomness, of an interruption which is not immediately regulated and defined within cycles of repetition and ritual, looms over the film from the outset."[49] Indeed, throughout the film a specific series of events operates as a generic "threat of randomness," a threat to the order both Jeanne and Akerman so carefully keep. The murder, in fact, is only a privileged disturbance within a film system already saturated with unease.

### The Automaton: Agency and Causality in *Jeanne Dielman*

Not only routine activities but such elements as light and sound seem to escape the rigid diegetic and cinematic orders. And in a way it is Akerman's confusion of these two realms, the "within" and the "outside," that is subversive: one does not know to what point the filmmaker is "in control." The erratic hum of a motor, for example, may break into the scene seemingly without notice. It can be seen as an example of the eruption of an uncontrolled "nature" into the film's order, which absorbs that

eruption. Or else, more simply, it can be considered as an enlargement of the material complexity of the field that Akerman makes available for consideration—just as the flickering of a neon light across the dining table at night can be recognized, appropriately, as a counterimage to the regulated turning on and off of lights that characterizes Jeanne's frugality.[50]

On another level, the refrigerator's white noise and the neon light can be considered as traces of the profilmic randomness intrinsic to some structural film. Such randomness is supposed to create a friction against an unswerving filmic structure. These sounds expand the visual and aural filmic field, promoting a reading of cinematic materiality that, in Akerman, is clearly redirected toward what Mary Ann Doane terms a "suspense without expectations."[51] The dawn at the end of Gehr's *Serene Velocity* or the windows in Snow's *Wavelength* hold a similar suggestion of uncontrolled, "natural" disruptions. More subliminally, however, the erratic eruptions in *Jeanne Dielman* work as reminders of an autonomy not entirely controlled by Jeanne's compulsive ordering.

It is almost with a shock of recognition that Mayne tells us how she long overlooked the fact that in the kitchen in *Jeanne Dielman* there is sometimes one chair by the table, sometimes two, and never any explanation for the change. "Is it possible," she asks, "that the creation of order, of such precise and seemingly controlled framing and mise-en-scène, is not only so strong but so seductive that blatantly disruptive details such as this pass unnoticed?"[52] The sense of threat that we feel as we watch the film, in other words, derives not only from our perception of disruption but from our complicity with the character's desire for normality, a complicity we may only recognize retroactively.

Akerman marks a divorce from Jeanne's orderliness and from the film's formal precision by allowing Jeanne's material world to be pervaded with a sense of randomness. This "threat of randomness" is embodied at several points in *Jeanne Dielman* by a sort of animism on the part of the objects in Jeanne's home, an animism that can be seen as the objects' necessary, "organic" intrusion on the artificiality of cinematic procedures—as the natural element within a rigidity of form (Akerman) and of behavior (Jeanne). Animism—the attribution of conscious life to material forms of reality— serves, in part, as a metaphor for a sort of randomness: a material order's seeming resistance to being tamed. Jeanne's breakdown on the third day, for example, is staged mostly as a struggle against objects.

Let us consider the effects of animism within the story, its significance for Jeanne. Many behaviorist accounts of psychology report that recurring traits of an obsessional compulsive are an intolerance of ambiguity—the

tendency toward symmetry, overpunctuality, meticulousness, frugality—and that the greatest fear of obsessive compulsives is to admit to their own actions, to a will that is their own.[53] Desire is presented as an external demand and is shaped as a set of rules, orders, and obligations that would seem to preclude the subject's sense of autonomy. In the film, objects—soapsuds, a button, a brush—move seemingly at their own will and irrespective of Jeanne's conscious desires. Thus they represent the main eventuality that a compulsive behavior pattern is supposed to fend off: autonomy.[54]

The notion of animism helps explain the disquieting quality of *Jeanne Dielman* in yet another respect as well. The film's overall lethal quality depends on a series of related concepts: the very fabric of this uncanny tour of domestic bliss is constituted not only through Akerman's doubling of referentiality—her hyperrealism—but from the obsessive compulsion to repeat and from the drive for stasis—present through Jeanne. The sense of a displaced, uncontrolled autonomy is theorized in Freud's "The Uncanny."[55] This text deals with the reverberations of the desire for and fear of stasis as it is displaced onto the external world. Coincidence, the appearance of the double, déjà vu, as well as passing misrecognitions of something or someone quite familiar, are seen as figures for the uncanny, a perverse compulsion on the part of nature to repeat. The fright of misrecognition incited by the figure of the automaton, its uncanniness, has to do with one's perception of how much the effect of animation—where intentions unquestionably issue from an interiority—might be in fact created from a set of a priori, mechanical, external rules. Here the link between an obsessive compulsive behavior and the automaton is uncovered. The automaton is a figuration for the anxiety lying behind the need to objectify desire. And it is this displacement that guarantees the implication of the spectator in his/her complicity with a desire for stasis and order. Akerman figures the precariousness of the subject's sense of autonomy by having inanimate objects—the external world—express themselves against the subject. She thus objectifies the obsessive compulsive's distorted sense of autonomy, breaking her own initial complicity with the character's desire for control.

The notion of the "disquieting familiar"[56] is particularly cogent in a film about domesticity, the scene that Akerman recalls experiencing as a little girl observing her own mother's gestures, intently and from a certain distance.[57] What is familiar and domestic Akerman reveals as utterly strange; in this resurfacing of estrangement she invokes the uncanny. The situation and theme experienced through the film are literally defamiliar-

ized. Where the family melodrama synecdochally caricatures domesticity through such devices as aprons, cakes, and dishes, Akerman insists on the familiarity of the domestic scene to the point where she creates one that is unbearably alienated.

The main condition for the emergence of uncanniness is a hesitation between two states: a dichotomy of animate and inanimate (clearly related to the fear of death). As the best examples of the uncanny, Freud quotes Jentch's (1906) discussion of figures of the automaton—those instances of "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive or conversely whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate."[58] Describing "the impression made by waxwork figures, artificial dolls and automatons," Freud notes "the uncanny effect of epileptic seizures and the manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the feeling that automatic, *mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation*"[59] (my italics).

All these figures imply a realistic representation, where animate and inanimate vie with each other in a balanced simulacral effect of "mechanical processes at work beneath the ordinary appearance of animation." Indeed, on a formal level, it has been recognized that the uncanny is most liable to result from a homogeneous, realistic texture. Freud himself refers to the amplification of uncanniness effected by a setting of "physical reality."[60] Once placed in an imaginary or fantasy setting, he argues, a story or event has less chance of evoking uncanniness, for there is no hesitation between the imaginary and the real. The phantasmic reverberation of an image is increased by a realist context—one in which the uncanny figure (image, scene) is only minimally detached from its background. Conversely, the uncanny is virtually nonexistent in a fairy tale, which is already framed as fantastic. Thus John de Andrea's naked hyperrealist sculptures, which fail to blend with their surroundings (unlike Duane Hanson's fully dressed hyperrealist types, which can almost be mistaken for unusually motionless people), do not present an uncanny effect.[61]

In her analysis of Hanson's hyperrealist sculptures, Naomi Schor refers to three-dimensionality as contributing to the uncanny effect that characterizes hyperrealism.[62] This "added dimension" is one in which the detail or "accessory has been promoted to a radical centrality."[63]

With cinema, of course, we have no third dimension. Yet the excess of detail apparent in the extended, scrutinizing gaze of a film like *Jeanne Dielman* founds the reading of the hyperrealist image on a similar and constitutive uncertainty: the illusion of naturalistic representation promises the animate, promises reality, at the same time that its excessiveness

suggests an artificiality that can pertain only to the inanimate order of the inorganic. This, of course, is the order of the cinematic surface.[64] Hence the perverse autonomy of the inanimate objects in *Jeanne Dielman* should mainly be seen as a figuration of the uncanny, which informs the film at the level of its style and texture—its hyperrealist images.[65] At the same time, the disquieting quality imparted by hyperrealism is in perfect accord with the obsessive compulsiveness of the film's central character, Jeanne, who, in her daily rituals, seems to live at the lowest level of self-definition or autonomy.[66]

Since the film establishes a rigid correspondence between the order of content and the order of cinematic structuring, Jeanne's mistakes in her own routine constitute only the most blatant cues for her emerging autonomy. These slips are not, of course, in the same class as the irregular appearance of sound, light, or chairs. The refrigerator hum, the flickering neon, the error in continuity respecting how many chairs there are in the kitchen—all can be seen as Akerman's basso commentary on the autonomy of the cinematic order vis-à-vis Jeanne's own, failing autonomy. Nonetheless, what these animistic spurts signal is the intermittent coexistence, within the film's system, of different orders of events in an extremely unstable balance. And at least in part, this precariousness is attendant on the wavering between the literal and the symbolic registers intrinsic to minimal hyperrealism.

This instability is made evident with the scene of the orgasm and murder. By occupying what was formerly an absent scene, a bracketed space, this scene stands as evidence of some hidden possibility. It introduces both the purely fictive register of representation (as opposed to Akerman's up-until-then literal renditions) and the character's automatism. What needs to be noticed is the linkage between what might be perceived as the character's automatic (in the sense of mechanical and unwilled) gesture and Akerman's aesthetics—her privileging of a serial accretion that seems blind to the different orders of events (figurative and literal) and aligns them as the same.

The associations of minimalism and hyperrealism with obsessive compulsion chart the formal and political reach of this blindness, this subversive equation of different orders of events—this *aesthetics of homogeneity*. Against the art that preceded it (which, if it reversed or suspended Cartesian logic, did so through a process of negation based on absence or on the absurd), minimal art suggests an alternative that is antirationalist without being irrational. In fact this art operates through an excess of rational order—an excess, however, that at the same time seems arbitrary in that it

follows the dictates of nonteleological, manic addition. The relentless cat-
aloguing of gestures and shots possible within a restricted grid is an exam-
ple of this assertion of an alternative logic—not irrational but overly ra-
tional. Krauss links this process of serial singular instantiation (what she
calls an "absurd nominalism") with a system of compulsions that ad-
dresses itself to the "purposelessness of purpose, to the spinning gears of a
machine disconnected from reason."[67] Her perceptive analogy between
minimalist accumulation and the rituals of obsessional logic can be taken
further in *Jeanne Dielman.*

Akerman's reliance on the concrete presentation of action as it happens
in time, her refusal of cinema's usual abbreviations, is an intrinsic part of
her twisting of logic and causality. Yet although she displays the murder
scene in exactly the same way as she does all the other scenes, thus rein-
forcing the notion of a cumulative and nonteleological seriality, the inter-
est of her minimalism lies in its simultaneous dramatic inflection: in her
use of a content that is not meant to preclude signification. If, for Beckett,
Molloy's sucking stone might work as well as any other object to circulate
within an obsessional logic,[68] for Akerman domestic tasks and the after-
noon prostitution are not quite interchangeable—not, at least, as much as
Jeanne could have wanted (and Akerman formally proposes). *Jeanne Diel-
man* takes the obsessional order to its "logical" consequences: pathos.
Thus the film deranges the pure alogic of minimalism through a leakage of
melodrama.

Through a gesture entirely contained within a preestablished melodra-
matic order of sudden reversals, and within the heroic determination (and
asceticism) that defines a gesture as tragic, Jeanne stabs her client after
having an orgasm. Yet the way in which Akerman shows this scene quali-
fies the dramatic tone of the events: the action happens as if it followed the
dictates of an external yet regulated order (the linear, irreversible passing
of real time). Jeanne performs the murder as if it were one more necessary
action within a series of routine timed gestures. Redesigning drama, Aker-
man purposefully skips the representation of causes. For motives she sub-
stitutes a series of automatic, alienated gestures, all with a similar affect.
And although these gestures each pertain to a different, independent cate-
gory, she makes their sequence radically continuous. By thus simulating
their equality to the utmost degree, Akerman defiles the significance of
both drama and banality. If the tragic is defined by the possibility of pre-
dicting as well as retroactively confirming the fate of a given character, one
could say, along with de Duve, that the static conditions of tragedy are
present in the film but not its dynamic conditions.[69] The film presents all

the conditions for the emergence of classical tragedy: a single space, a linear chronology, a single character. But the characters in *Jeanne Dielman* are not moved by acceleration, by an internal force. In fact they barely move, shifting in space through constant motions—the motions of habit.[70]

Our initial question about the surplus generated by an overly rigid notion of balance can at this point be posed anew, though it needs to expand and encompass another, related question: within Akerman's aesthetics of homogeneity, does the "purposelessness of purpose," or Jeanne's repetition compulsion, function as the counterpart of Akerman's formal strategies of description and literalness? If so, how does the murder scene fit into this scenario of repetition and literalness?

At issue is the difference between an autonomous, willed gesture and a mechanical, meaningless repetition. Though the entire film seems fraught with a deathly texture, a "lethal quality," the main figuration of this mood is clearly the murder scene. More acutely, this scene marks the operative perversion of the film—a perversion related to its reading and reception.

It is interesting to note how much of the critical readings of *Jeanne Dielman* are provoked by Akerman's perverse mimicry of psychoanalysis's theater of visibility in her structuring of on- and off-scene events. The film can be seen as structured on a model of the manifest and the latent. Most immediately given is a filmic structure based on a dichotomy between visibility and invisibility: extended takes of housekeeping actions (the scene) are opposed to very short takes and off-screen vestiges for the elided actions of prostitution (the obscene).

Claire Johnston's analysis of *Jeanne Dielman*, for instance, indulges in a terminological slippage whereby "absence" connotes both a visual and aural phenomenon and a psychoanalytic construct. Here is Johnston's interpretation of the events leading to the murder:

> A repressed sexuality erupting as jouissance, setting up a series of parapraxes, creating both the disorganization of physical space and temporal gaps. This eruption of the semiotic, the drives, closed off from our view and unnarrated, . . . constitutes an expenditure without exchange within the economy set up by the film text. As such it must be annulled in the act of murder, in the abolition of the phallus.[71]

The analysis is in certain respects indisputable and is voiced, with slight variations, by several other feminist critics.[72] My suspicion of it grows, paradoxically, from its adequacy: I am suspicious of the ease with which Akerman's work is read as perfectly matching two different orders of discourse—one formal and cinematic, the other theoretical. This homo-

logical tendency issues from a methodological error and is based on the essentialist fantasy of making a theoretical concept, the unconscious let us say, cinematically visible. In most readings of the film, it leads to a subtending determinism. One should be careful not to reduce Akerman's work to a sophisticated structure that frames or makes visible the disruptive element, be it a gesture, a sound, or a drive. *Jeanne Dielman* may lend itself to a reading of the dichotomy between a dry, minimal background (of withheld gestures and camera movements) and a visual disturbance (in the expression of compulsion, which is then privileged as a surfacing repressed meaning). This structural dichotomy is then transferred to the division between conscious and unconscious, where the "obscene" represents the repressed. But such a reading is reductive to the extent that it takes the eruption of "repressed pleasure" (the "acte manquée," as Akerman calls the orgasm and murder) as *the event* of the film.

In "*Jeanne Dielman*: Death in Installments," Jayne Loader sets out to "correct" Akerman's film—perfect, in her opinion, but for the inclusion of a "sensationalist murder," an unnecessary event introduced in the film for purely rhetorical reasons. For Loader, Akerman succumbs "to the demands of the traditional narrative film form that requires a bang-up ending and the culture that requires a neatly packaged and thoroughly acceptable message."[73] In a very different response, Brenda Longfellow debates both the dispassionate murder and the orgasm that precedes it in terms that relate each to the other, and that link Jeanne's motives and the rhetorical effectiveness of the film. In Longfellow's view, the murder scene has two possible readings: as a negation either of Jeanne's desire or of the law. In either case, it stands as "the one singular act of unbridled affirmation, of violent refusal."[74]

This kind of feminist reading of *Jeanne Dielman* privileges the eruption of the character's autonomy as a sign of a (social) system in crisis. Are Akerman's formal politics indeed restricted to this notion of autonomy? Jeanne's affectlessness can certainly be co-opted through a psychological reading, yet I would read the "purposelessness of purpose" (suggested by a nondifferentiated accretion of gestures) as pertaining not to the logic of "character"—to a psychological breakdown—but to the film's hybridization of tragic and minimalist logics. Under the guise of a homogeneous texture, these logics operate at cross-purposes, stating the significance of intensity, excess, and evidence as a viable alternative for psychological representation. The borderline status that characterizes Akerman's diegesis—characters are perceived as compulsive, alienated, mutant—can actually be seen, in this connection, as part of a larger affliction of the

filmic system. The film's ateleological accretion (of shots, of movements) offers no guarantee of stability. The supplement (the arationality) generated by the character's manic obsession with order, as well as by Akerman's "blind" stringing together of cooking and killing, is the matter.

The mutual exclusiveness between a literal and a symbolic meaning constitutes what Paul de Man has called an allegory of reading. The language conventions ruling a traditional experience of image and text (conventions that would direct our reading either to the literal or to the metaphoric or symbolic sense) can in certain instances be subverted through an imposed, flickering reading. For example, to take one of de Man's points, the question "What is the difference?" could refer to an interest in the difference itself (between this or that) or could be taken rhetorically to constitute a questioning of the validity of the question itself; to constitute an in-difference. To verify the effectiveness of this allegory of reading in Akerman's cinematic minimal hyperrealism, we would have to ask what kind of closure, if any, is attained through the stroboscopy of mutually exclusive—literal and figurative—registers in *Jeanne Dielman*.

The unsettled referent of the question "What is the difference?" can help us perceive the nature of the reductionism involved in a causal reading of *Jeanne Dielman,* a reading entirely through the fictional register. Such an interpretation would undoubtedly point to the orgasm and the murder as the film's circumscribed and discrete loci of recognizable "differences": the determining factors for the character's actions. But the in-difference latent in the other inflection of the phrase "What is the difference?" disavows this reading. Akerman's repeated statements on the equality of traditional dramatic scenes and images "low in the hierarchy of drama" directly address the attempt to reduce the film to a naturalistic plot of cause and effect.[75] Instead of making the expected explanation of Jeanne's gesture,[76] Akerman has consistently defended her decisions about the murder scene as a needed narrative effect:

> Certain people hate this murder and say "you have to be more pure. If you show a woman doing dishes, you shouldn't show a murder." But I don't think that's true. The strength of the thing is to show them both in the same film. And it didn't end with the murder. There are seven really very strong minutes after that.[77]

Indeed, one can be tempted to assign the film's hermeneutic key to this last, seven-minute shot of life at its minimal denominator. The lethal quality of *Jeanne Dielman* is perfectly epitomized in this suspended ending—a shot of Jeanne almost motionless. This long take of Jeanne sitting in the

living room reinstates the significance of the in-differentiation to which the film has referred all along—in the repetition compulsion of the character's gestures, in the series of slips in activities carried on automatically.[78]

If the "spectacle of mere functioning life" keeps us breathing in sync with the breathing in Warhol's film *Sleep* (1963),[79] the light flickering on Jeanne, mysteriously crossing her face, as she sits at the dining table after the murder, establishes the possibility of viewing the flickering of a wearied emotion. The last shot—"the seven really very strong minutes after that"—communicates the throbbing state we traverse with Jeanne, conveyed in her unforgettable expressions and gestures. Yet once again, any "sentimentality about the end" is disallowed by the preceding murder scene. And Akerman's recourse to that scene in part reflects her desire to avoid an open-ended structure, a lack of closure that would "boringly" repeat the film's nondramatic beginning.[80] One needs, then, to rethink the equivalence of the two images of death proposed in the film—first, a homeostatic apathy that is a kind of death and, second, the murder—as the flickering poles of an irresolvable either/or, of a stable irresolution. The ultimate inability of the character's obsessive compulsion to paste over an unco-optable alterity—the arbitrary senselessness of the murder scene— marks the resistance of *Jeanne Dielman* to any kind of psychological determinism.

Joan Copjec's theorization of the relations between the notions of the automaton, causality, and the real in Jacques Lacan helps us understand the potential subversiveness of the film's ambivalent conclusion. Her positing of inertia (through Freud and Lacan) as an antievolutionary notion is especially interesting in this respect.[81] Inertia is that "which opposes, suspends, the evolutionary, temporal continuity on which a vitalist idealism such as Bergson's is conceptually based and which ultimately depends on a hidden teleology, a determinist belief in a Primary Cause always at work erasing the possibility of any new beginning."[82] *Jeanne Dielman* resolutely denies teleology. The film's ending, in its grand figuration of inertia, suspends circularity; this end is not a return of (in the sense of a cathartic return to) the beginning.[83]

The quasi-mechanical attributes of Jeanne/Delphine Seyrig's performance preclude as well as necessitate arbitrariness. Though the lack of psychological motivation in Seyrig's performance sabotages a reductionist reading of the orgasm and murder scene as the repressed event of the film, her seeming automatism justifies, in the narrative, the arbitrariness of the change of registers—Akerman's/Jeanne's "purposelessness of purpose." The murder scene constitutes the real excess to this literalist-descriptive

tour de force. In affirming its necessity, Akerman is not only answering to a political, feminist demand for closure. The murder scene constitutes the transfiguration of the banal—not only of reality, but of narrative. To represent a narrative cliché under the aegis of literalness is to reclaim fiction as one more element in the unending series of "and, and, and" that propels the film as pure accumulation. The telos of this accumulation becomes a matter of the kind of difference one is willing to stop at in experiencing repetition.

I want to return to the notion of the automaton, through which, we saw above, a vague threat of animism is introduced into the film's texture and events. We should consider one more distinction: Copjec notes that while our current sense of the word "automaton" refers to a mechanical effect, a movement performed "as if by some motive power, but which in fact is monotonous, routine and without intelligence," for the Greeks "automaton" was "an adjective which, applied to a person, meant acting of one's own will, of oneself . . . applied to events, happening of themselves, without cause, accidentally or naturally."[84] Through Jeanne, Akerman correlates, without entirely collapsing, the current and ancient meanings of "automaton." In the process she brings out the internal fissure, the threat, lying behind the automaton:

> If we are always threatened by the fact that some part of this body (symbolic) might escape our attention, this is because language always produces an excess of meaning. . . . The excess which Lacan calls the object small a is the non-symbolizable product of symbolization itself. It is the little kernel of nonsense, of the real which Freud so persistently sought in every hallucination, the cause to which the subject is subjected.[85]

This threat, Copjec points out, is often negotiated "by recourse to one form of determinism or another. Even in the absence of my conscious attention, my arm will move automatically (we see how eventually the two senses of automaton coincide), I tell myself."[86]

*Jeanne Dielman* voids the eventuality of this coincidence. Thus the film figures the discrepancy between the two versions of "automaton" as a wound at the heart of the representation of intentionality: as a short circuit in the possibility of a deterministic (and essentialist) reading. Instead of leading to an ultimate cause (whether for the character's gestures or for Akerman's), the film is a liminal representation that insists on the problematics of causes.

Through the perverse homology of two distinct images of death—one

inert, the other active—Akerman adds a structuring ambivalence to the film's representation. For the question of whether Jeanne acts through a monotonous, routine, nonintelligent movement—automatically—or instead acts of her own will—autonomously—resists interpretation.[87] This ambivalence does not impede the film from affirming a feminist aesthetics. It does suggest, however, how the film's blinding clarity goes beyond a mere rhetorical effectiveness.

# 4 EXPANDING THE "I"

## Character in Experimental Feminist Narrative

*Modern feminism . . . is sociological in its character as it is in its historical devel-
opment. It cannot escape the torments which spring from speaking for a collec-
tivity. . . . landed with the identity of women as an achieved fact of history and
epistemology, [modern feminism] can only swing between asserting or refusing the
completeness of this given identity.*—Denise Riley, 1988[1]

The notion of identification has a problematic status in the modernist film.
Producers and critics of antinaturalist film tend to consider issues of nar-
rative and character construction in negative terms, flatly rejecting con-
ventional psychological constructs. The problematics of interiority, for
instance, are obviously inadequate to discuss a cinema that so clearly
distinguishes its characters—when figuring them—from their flesh-and-
blood referents. The tension present in the awkward movements of Bres-
son's models and in the voice-over that expresses a character's subjectivity
in a monotone; the disjunction in Marguerite Duras's *India Song* (1974)
between the dancing silent bodies and the voices that fill up an entire
empty room with gossip, composing a narrative atmosphere; the body as
the cypher of an untranslatable language in Leslie Thornton's *Adynata*
(1983), a comment on orientalism—these are examples of how the body
has differently served experimental narrative projects. The representation
of the body entirely bypasses psychological motivation and spectatorial
identification, furthering a narrative or a nexus of ideas. Yet as these alter-

native bodies perform a function that goes beyond the negation of conventional motivation, their positive role needs investigation.

I focus here on an instance of experimental narrative in which the construction of identity, and hence the notion of character, is particularly delicate: experimental feminist film. If individual characters are charged with the need to represent a collective identity—that of women, for instance—the question becomes, How is one to create a positive, potentially plural representation that nevertheless does not aim to achieve a totalized status? This question becomes all the more urgent in the late '60s, when the feminist goal of making the personal political seems to converge with the intellectual revision of totalizing systems that began after 1968. This revision of "universal" representation of course includes a reassessment of Hollywood narrative and a need to unmask that cinema's univocality.

The notion of representativeness is at issue in several experimental feminist films, narrative as well as documentary. In politically or socially oriented film, an essentialist, bloated version of representation can range from the allegorical to its flip side, the average or standard. The allegorical option may be exemplified by the overly loaded signifiers in "Pride" and "Gluttony," the sections of *Seven Women Seven Sins* (1988) directed by Ulrike Ottinger and Helke Sanders. Here, naturalism is traded for a symbolic and stylistic overcharge, a willed reduction that is perhaps inherent in this project. A film like Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986), on the other hand, makes its signified the average or neutral. In an attempt to create an ideological, tokenistic panorama about working girls' lives, each role is reduced to a principal signifying trait. But the idea of the typical—of the common denominator within diversity—is best exemplified in such feminist documentaries of the late '60s and early '70s as *The Woman's Film* (1969), a compilation of interviews in which mostly working-class women—black, white, and one Chicana—talk about their lives. Kate Millett's *Three Lives* (1971) is another, similar example. These films represent privileged instances of the meshing of cinema and politics—a consciousness-raising process shared with the spectator.[2] In an attempt to articulate multivocality, they feature a variety of idiosyncratic voices, yet they make these voices coalesce into a bland collectivity. In doing so they compromise crucial polemical issues—class, race—in favor of a problematic notion of solidarity.[3]

To historicize the inevitable meeting of cinema, avant-garde practices, and feminism, Laura Mulvey, one of the most influential proponents of the "second phase" of feminist film practice, evaluates these films of the "first

phase": "Their weakness lies in limitation of the cinema verité tradi-
tion . . . [in the] assumption that the camera . . . by registering typical
shared experiences can create political unity through the process of identi-
fication."[4] To escape the immediacy of what she sees as a basically expres-
sive use of the medium, Mulvey proposes a radical formalism and a com-
plex and sophisticated use of theory—psychoanalysis, deconstruction,
semiotics—as structuring models. For the filmmakers of the second phase
of feminist filmmaking, the various ways in which meaning is produced
can be unmasked through theories based on the splitting of the sign (into
signified/signified), the workings of the unconscious, and the active pres-
ence of ideology in language.[5] Using a distancing cinematic vocabulary—
long takes, extended frontal addresses, quotations, manipulated imagery,
tableaux configuring layers of significance—these directors' films refor-
mulate conventions of address, trying to replicate by formal means the
themes discussed on the soundtrack (sexual difference, for example). In
different ways, Mulvey's and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1978)
and *Penthesilea* (1974), Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979), and Yvonne Rainer's
*Lives of Performers* (1972) or *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) ex-
emplify this cinema's attempts to enunciate a theoretical discourse.[6]

It is important to examine how films that distance themselves from the
essentialist thrust of the militant feminist documentary deal with the per-
sistent demands to represent a feminine collective. How does the film-
maker handle the demands of representativeness—the political dimension
of subject representation, the very quest of feminism—without falling into
another, perhaps more elaborate form of essentialism? How endemic to the
feminist project is the question of identification? Using Rainer's cinema
as an example, I would argue that the use of cinema to illustrate a the-
sis (feminist, social, deconstructive) necessarily displaces the question
of identification. Rather than suggesting an identity between image and
reality (the realist representation under attack), this analytical cinema
matches image to idea (or theory).[7] Formal tropes become illustrations of
ideas, the progressive distantiation that the camera assumes toward its
subject in *Penthesilea,* for instance, standing for the notion of a distancing
effect. Such equations of formal devices with concepts ultimately become
allegorical figurations.[8]

In this chapter I shall be concerned with two experimental narrative
films from the early '70s that issue from a common minimalist heritage:
Rainer's *Lives of Performers* and Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1974). The latter
film makes clear use of the vocabulary of minimalist performance found in
Rainer's performances and writing of the late '60s and early '70s: serial ac-

cumulation, neutral characters/performers, and tasklike activities culled from everyday life—all tactics in a purposeful project to strip gesture and movement of symbolism and intentionality.

In her essay "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies . . ." Rainer taps into a major minimalist issue in drama and performance: how does one neutralize the humanist and romantic implications of an artwork that depends, as dance does, on the human body?[9] The art of the '70s tended to efface the self; indeed a minimalist motto ran, "Stand, walk, run, eat, show movies or move or be moved by some *thing* rather than one-self."[10] The displacement of a plot motor or character motive to a "thing rather than oneself" has an extra function in Rainer's films: it conveys a disbelief in an essential subjectivity, whether of author or of character. Rainer thus establishes a link between minimalist strategies and a larger question addressed by deconstruction and by Lacanian theory: that of the (dis)appearance of the subject in representation. This ambitious program is dissected in my analysis of Rainer's film.

Akerman and Rainer stand at the intersection of European antinatural-ism and the American '70s avant-garde. Indeed, each borrows distancing techniques from the cultural traditions of the other: Akerman defined her project most clearly after living in New York in the early '70s; Rainer seems to have followed the opposite trajectory, moving from American avant-garde dance and performance to a distanced narrative that appropriates Godardian and Brechtian techniques of quotation and juxtaposition. Yet both Akerman and Rainer have an investment in narrative, and both owe a debt to minimalism. In their work, theoretical debates on the "death of the author" intersect with a formal praxis: a proposal of alternative represen-tations of the subject in experimental narrative film.

Rainer's and Akerman's cinematic strategies share an antipsychological, dedramatized program, yet are clearly opposite. The hyperbolic literal-ness and unswerving though corroded linearity of Akerman's cinema dis-tinguish it clearly from the vertical, associative mode of Rainer's work, which is marked by such features as the use of collage and heterogeneous material.[11] Akerman's *Je tu il elle* condenses author and performer, ef-fecting an internal disjunction in the characters' "presence." Rainer's aesthetic of heterogeneity, on the other hand, demands a dispersal of authorial enunciation through the voices of many performers (in *Lives of Performers*) and through different material inscriptions (*Film about a Woman Who . . .*, 1974, *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, 1980, and *Privilege*, 1990). Both Rainer and Akerman inscribe their presences in their films, yet, at the same time problematize authorial inscription. For me, these

directors' contrasting means of redesigning the relations among author, character, and performer raise the following question: how does the centrifugal associative thrust of heterogeneity fare against the centripetal, literal strategies of homogeneity in shaping each filmmaker's claim to stake out a social dimension of the personal that bypasses the conventional rhetoric of "representativeness"?

### The Lure of Center in Rainer's Work: A Cautionary Tale

*I like to think that I have a careful screening process operating to exclude personal material that applies uniquely to my experience. . . . (when and if I become aware of a prevalence of intestinal difficulties in the population of my audience, then maybe I will consider dealing with that as material!)*—Yvonne Rainer[12]

Rainer's essay "Looking Myself in the Mouth" makes explicit one of her major concerns in confronting cinematic narrative—the avoidance of the myth of a unified subject, with its attendant reliance on a distinct character, author, narrator.

In *Lives of Performers,* Rainer's first film, she proceeds paradigmatically.[13] The seriality of Rainer's film is her way of facing down the dangers of narrative, which are condensed in the key notion of identification. As soon as a statement or section of dialogue threatens to become a convincing fiction, to acquire the weight of belief, it is replaced by another. Dramatic development is traded for a fuguelike accretion of discourses (variations on private relationships among artists). Editing and camera movement do not analyze a continuum in order to recreate its totality; rather, one body and utterance are constantly replaced by others, which have the same syntactical function. Rainer's vertical substitutions in the film's structure open up narrative to essayistic excursions.[14]

Rainer overlaps two distinct but related issues. She simultaneously negates the fictive unity of author, character, and narrator and claims, through the same set of representational strategies, the positive attribution of a deindividualized, collective enunciation. In *Lives of Performers* she clearly lays claim to a collective voice, beginning with the plural of the film's title and continuing with the abstracting strategy of making the performers interchangeable. Nobody is to stand for one position or point of view. The film carries this uncertainty most interestingly in the intermittent, aleatory connections between an individualized subjectivity and a body intended as "neutral." Though the ultimate direction of this neutrality seems unclear, here as in *The Man Who Envied Women,* it certainly

constitutes a simple, negative answer to mechanisms of identification.[15] A narrative is drafted, but character and body perform a ballet of misencounter. Neutrality in these films, rather than transmuting the self into the collective, becomes a function of the dispersal, even the defection, of the self.

The warring aims of making a character credible and "depersonalizing" her burden Rainer's narratives with a split between personal invocation and a wariness of the "purely personal." Given Rainer's need simultaneously to disperse and to disclose the personal and private, one needs to pay constant attention to her distribution and redimensioning of the "I." The terms of Rainer's ambivalent stake in self-effacement, however, must be evaluated more precisely. How are they inflected by theory? What are the chances of her distributive tactics' promoting a collective enunciation?

Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism may clarify the cultural and social grounding of Rainer's aesthetic of heterogeneity. Undermining the conventional assurance of a text's unified origin and source, the dialogical text absorbs different voices without masking or neutralizing their marks of class, race, and age.[16] Dialogism opens discourse to a "hidden interior polemic" characterized by the "active influence of another's word on the writer's word."[17] This undermining of the individual in favor of the collective is precisely what Rainer seeks through her strategies of redistribution and reallocation of texts, genres, and voices.

Rainer's aesthetic of heterogeneity is to be understood as a compromise between the moral and theoretical imperatives of erasure (the avoidance of traditional representations of women) and visibility (the need to construct an alternative, positive image for women). Again, one is confronted with the issue of visibility. Cinematic representation is intercepted by a feminist polemic that disparages visuality itself, assuming that the very act of looking is contaminated by essentialist, patriarchal values. Implicit in Rainer's preoccupation with avoiding the kind of identification with character (or else with herself as author) created in classical cinema is the idea of what Mulvey calls the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of women,[18] as well as the bracketing of authorship performed by Roland Barthes, Foucault, and others.

Another issue in Rainer's loud rejection of identification is the proper role of autobiography—that is, the narrativization and visual construction of a self. Within the feminist tradition of making the personal public two different models of self-presentation can be mobilized: psychoanalysis and consciousness-raising group gatherings. Both are fundamentally autobiographical, and both may demonstrate the range and the limitations of

the dialogical possibilities of a narrative of the self. What is each model's potential for representativeness?

Implicit in the consciousness-raising model is the goal of exemplarity. Accounts are gathered from a number of people; as they are edited, thematic associations among them are supposed to construe a kind of generic autobiography, its main function being to smooth out differences, to evince solidarity. The psychoanalytic model reverses this perspective: though it, too, is based mainly on the personal account, it privileges the recovering of nuances, repetitive structures, slips, ambiguities, and points of resistance. Psychoanalysis reverses the construction of the self—or, rather, the collective self—sought in feminist documentaries such as *The Woman's Film*: it exfoliates gradations from a subjectivity known from the start as constituted solely in this very process of displaying multiple, contradictory facets.[19]

Rainer's format of juxtaposition and heterogeneity is consonant with this notion of a self-presentation in negative. Of all her works, *Journeys from Berlin/1971* best articulates psychoanalysis as a setting for a disowned language. Here the interweaving of history and story in the analysand's discourse is echoed in a montage that slides from the visceral to the critical. The discursive rambling, voiced by the analysand, suggests a subjectivity made up from bits and pieces taken from books, diaries, and articles, in an ill-disguised malaise of civilization.

In this appropriation of the discursive texture of psychoanalysis to simulate the "contesting claims of politics, feminism, morality, psychoanalysis and personal needs, desires, fears and myths,"[20] the status of the various issues discussed is left in question. Rainer's use of psychoanalysis as a formal model is, moreover, founded on a common misconception: it presupposes an analogy between modernist strategies of distanciation and the split nature of subjectivity.[21] The connection Rainer makes between a certain cinematic praxis and psychoanalytic theory serves two correlate purposes. First it enshrines a mode of reflexivity based on a displayed heterogeneity, claiming visual and aural breaks of continuity as privileged antinaturalistic strategies. Second, and on the other hand, it enlists Lacanian theory in the equivocal function of connoting the Real of subject formation, thus validating what are in fact purely formal analogies between two very different orders of representation: while filmic representation has a fictional referent, psychoanalytic theory has as its referent the reality of the subject.

The recruitment of poststructuralist deconstruction or Lacanian theory in support of formal heterogeneity is based on the assumption that the

presence of fissures and breaks within the filmic text in itself evidences the disruption of the subject. The critical and practical reduction of effects of defamiliarization to these formal devices is, of course, highly question-able. One can even question the implicit assumption that the juxtaposi-tional mode is unequivocally deconstructive. Moreover, the subversive-ness of deconstruction is itself controversial. In *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection,* Rodolphe Gasché calls attention to deconstruction's critical and formal slippage into neutrality.[22]

Rainer's aesthetic of heterogeneity is shaped as a formal and ethical ambivalence between, on the one hand, multiple possibilities of action— as her cinema generates its various choreographed positions and camera angles, it epitomizes potentiality itself—and, on the other, the romantic tone that emerges from text and voice, layered in a continual process of revision and analysis. But the deconstructive potential of this ambiguity is qualified; Rainer may create a surface of contrast and discrepancy, but her use of ambiguity and cliché ultimately neutralizes any intended "truth."[23] Her relentless pursuit of contradiction is answered by the sollipsistic speech of the analysand in *Journeys from Berlin/1971:* "Why won't some-one get me off the cusp of this plague, this ellipsis, suspension, anticipa-tion, this retraction, denial, digression, irony, . . . the self-contemplative self, and the personal as a . . . slave of autonomy and perfectibility."[24]

Psychoanalysis functions in Rainer's work as both a formal mode and a corrective project.[25] The personal as a "slave of perfectibility" is sup-posedly in agony in these films. In a critique of Rainer's romantic attempt at deconstruction, Bruce Andrews describes the films as "decontextual-ized without being recontextualized except in formal clutter. The limits of this, once you extend it to the political realm, is its tendency to valorize a kind of dematerialization."[26]

The allegorical thrust of a project that reflects the desire to illustrate or somehow give form to dispersal and effacement is evident. For how is one otherwise to represent an abstract idea (Independent Woman, Sensitive Artist, Contradiction of Bourgeoisie) while transcending the concreteness of the indexical image? Rainer's work participates therefore, in what Paul Arthur has accurately referred to as a "will to allegory" in New Narrative film.[27] Taking Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women* as his main exam-ple, Arthur shows how its various attempts to avoid essentialism through decontextualization all aim toward the shaping of new, capitalized, es-sences. Lost in this form of allegorical figuration are the particularities that convey what is properly named "personal."

One should at this point distinguish the notion of allegory described by

Arthur from its recent revaluations (by Paul de Man, Craig Owens, etc.) deriving from Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.[28] Here Benjamin opposes allegory to the sublimating romantic symbol. For him, allegory's modernity lies in its store of fragments with distinct and traceable histories. Allegory in Benjamin's sense requires a hermeneutics akin to that of collage; it demands a knowledge of the historical and cultural references invoked by the multiple images that form that fragmentary composite. But Rainer's work reduces the potential for exegesis implied in Benjamin's conception, congealing the power of allegory in easily graspable tableaux. This is not to deny that the redeeming value of allegories— as carriers of history and as vehicles of detail, as opposed to the idealist, totalizing transcendence of symbol—may remain inherent in the potentially subversive powers of heterogeneity as a mode.

The ways in which Rainer's juxtapositional aesthetics lead to decontextualization, and ultimately to reified allegory, demands further investigation, for the replacement of the concrete with the general is not a necessary consequence of collage. In several of her films Rainer's juxtapositional inclusiveness hints at very concrete and personal problems. The issues of gentrification included in snatches of documentary footage in *The Man who Envied Women* or the interviews on menopause in *Privilege* remain the strongest interventions about such issues in experimental film. The goal of juxtaposition in the work of Rainer, Bruce Connor, Godard, Leslie Thornton, Peggy Ahwesh, and others is to subvert abstraction through the inscription of snatches of political and social history. As we shall see with the analysis of Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her,* such inscriptions can be the main channel to historicize the films' issues.

The question facing experimental film, particularly those films engaging with narrative and character, remains, regarding feminism, that of representativeness. If in principle a juxtapositional aesthetics allows for a broader range for associations and, conversely, if Akerman's exclusive focus on a single character's trajectory seems to preclude the formation of a social panorama, are there any rules for the articulation of private and social realms in one or the other mode of filmmaking?

We have discussed the dangers in supposing that multiplicity guarantees representativeness, a mistake made clear in politicized documentaries of the '70s. We have also seen that paradigmatic linkages and dispersal of authorship do not distill, necessarily, a purer version of Woman. At first glance, Rainer's rejection of "intestinal problems" as a theme seems consistent with her programmatic attack on expressions of interiority, and a natural outcome of her minimalist agenda. Yet the boycott of certain as-

pects of life as too personal to deserve representation staunches Rainer's initially daring idea of using autobiography to convert emotional investment into analytic distance. Screened by a test of (supposed) collective interest, the personal is drained of its idiosyncrasies, becoming a token of itself—"the personal." One could venture that Rainer's proscription of the "purely personal" clarifies Akerman's challenge, standing, in a way, as the backdrop of Akerman's positing of particularities.

### The Eroded Index: Liminality in *Je tu il elle*

*If one indefinitely runs up against the same set of singularities, one can feel confident that he has drawn near the singularity of the subject's desire.*—Serge Leclaire[29]

*Particularity is the finger, that of a woman showing to her lover her obscaena.*
—George Bataille[30]

The process of dispossession set in motion by Akerman's films leads us to wonder over the possible relations of minimalism, in its move toward equivalence and neutrality, and the scene envisioned by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—one in which every proper noun is collective and there is no subject of enunciation.[31] Foucault summarized this radical thought in the form of a "manual or guide to everyday life":

> Do not demand of politics that it restore the rights of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to "de-individualize" by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization.[32]

This process of "de-individualization" is crucial in *Je tu il elle.* The film's sociopolitical thrust derives from its peculiar representation of the subject, which cannot be recognized through the usual standards of typification, where common traits issue from multiple voices.

I have suggested that Akerman's and Rainer's focus on the personal in their works has as its necessary supplement a spillage into the social. I have also denied that there is an immediate correlation between neutralizing the personal and giving the subject a collective status. The insistence on the individual and on psychology, if only to negate them—whether in theory (Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault) or in form (Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer)—implicitly acknowledges these categories' centrality in our present conception of the subject. The very language of Foucault's concept, in

which the particle "de-" precedes "individualization," shows the difficulty of formulating the link between an anti-essentialist conception of the subject and a collective representation. Rainer's proposal of the term "a-womanly" at the end of *The Man Who Envied Women* attests to precisely these difficulties. Is an anti-essentialist representation already part of an alternate conception of the individual in which the personal and the political are seen as integral to each other? Perhaps the answer to that question lies in conceiving of neutrality not as conventional representation in which subjectivity is stripped of its particularities, but as a liminal phase in the representation of the subject, one that might or might not issue in a collective enunciation.

*Je tu il elle* addresses an essentialist conception of the subject on several levels. Where Rainer's distributive tactics diffract a single consciousness through several material bodies, Akerman's process of de-individualization results from an untenable accumulation of functions in a single body. There is no compromising of one function at the expense of the other. This accumulation creates a fissure in the body's supposed unity, forcing one to read several conflicting registers of identity with equal acuity: that of author, performer, and character. This internal disjunction puts pressure on the notion of identity and altogether precludes syntactical disruptions such as voice-over narration or breaks in continuity.

More important, Akerman confronts the negative aspect of neutrality by taking particularity to its limit, to the point of eccentricity. Besides presenting a generic "anti" stance—antipsychology, anti-interiority, anticausality—Akerman's radically unstable representation of subjectivity proposes the possibility of a "mutant" being.

*Je tu il elle* is structured in three parts.[33] In the first part, the "time of subjectivity," fixed shots record the activities of the film's main character (played by Akerman): writing, wandering in her room, lying on her mattress, eating powdered sugar from a bag, looking out of the glass door and at times at the camera. A voice-over (Akerman's own) describes the scene but makes no attempt to be true to the image on screen. The film's second part, the "time of reportage," shows Akerman in a truck with "He," the truck driver. This section features less voice-over, long silences, and two extended monologues by the trucker. Where the film's first part is totally without context, the "time of reportage" has a full and detailed social texture—the world of roadside bars and truck stops. To complement this precise scenario of transience, the truck driver gives an equally precise verbal rendition of his domestic and sexual life.

The film's third part, the "time of relationship," shows Akerman arriv-

ing at the apartment of a female friend—her former lover. Three long takes
in medium shot show their lovemaking. In the film's first two parts, Aker-
man occupies an ambivalent position—a neither-here-nor-there as neither
subject nor object of the film. Here, however, the involvement and absorp-
tion of the two women with each other and within the diegetic space is
absolute. Akerman amplifies the sound of colliding bodies and ruffling
sheets, making the lovemaking scene concrete and stylized. The awkward
sound and distanced camera position (without cut-away shots or close-
ups) qualify Akerman's assimilation in the scene: they situate the autho-
rial presence as split between performing the action and directing it.

The film's structure may be compared with the rites of passage de-
scribed by Arnold Van Gennep,[34] three-phase situations in which one is
first alienated, then suspended in a transitional, liminal phase, and finally
reintegrated in a new social status or rank. The rite's first phase comprises
symbolic behavior denoting the individual's or group's separation from an
earlier status, or from "a set of cultural conditions (a 'state')."[35] The sec-
ond, liminal phase is an in-between state, a neither-here-nor-there. Van
Gennep characterizes liminality as a moment in which those undergoing
the rite of passage are refashioned, losing their individual traits, so that
they may prepare to assume their new social role. Accordingly, they are
submitted to "levelling and stripping processes": they "usually wear only
a strip of clothing or even go naked to prove their lack of any property,
insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, nothing that may dis-
tinguish them from their fellow initiands."[36] Individuals are thus ground
down into a sort of homogeneous social matter. Then, in the third stage,
they are absorbed into a hierarchical society of prescribed norms and be-
havioral codes.

The model assumes a process of integration and development which,
however, is clearly mocked in *Je tu il elle*. For the film voids any notion of a
closure, or of the kind of normative behavior that would be arrived at in
the third phase of a rite of passage. Nor, for that matter, can its first and
second parts be equated exactly with a moment of separation and then of
liminality. Instead, the film displays a purposeful indetermination in rela-
tion not only to the positions of character, author, director but to that of a
fixed sexual identity. Mobility is privileged over finality. In fact the film's
epigrammatic image is of directionless mobility: liminality is posited not
as the ground for a future, delineated, identity but as an image of a mutant,
transient one.

One can better understand the scope of Akerman's transgression if one
expands the concept of liminality onto her formal strategies. If the film's

confused (and suspended) temporality, for example, upsets the very representation of identity, it also suggests the progressive potential of liminality. For, as Victor Turner remarks on the liminal in sociocultural process: "Since . . . liminal time is not controlled by the clock, it is a time . . . when anything might, even should, happen."[37]

The film's first challenge to the idea of fixed identity lies in Akerman's presence as performer, which subverts the autobiographical fallacy not through a poli-vocality or a declaration of neutrality but through the confrontational tactic of the "pseudo-evidence of the visible."[38] This term refers to Akerman's explicit and yet stylized presentation of the sexual act in the last part of the film. In fact it applies to the overall sense of display in Akerman's mise-en-scène—a process that shows objects and performers in a sort of high definition. Adding to this minimalist distinctness and apparently overt display, Akerman's presence as the film's "I" creates an internal tension and indicates a voided subjectivity. "It was a matter of putting across a 'malaise,' " said Akerman when asked about why she acted in the film. "I started to direct an actress and soon I noticed that her perfection went against the project. I also thought [it] more appropriate . . . to oppose the mise-en-scène's rigidity with my own uneasiness."[39] Still the psychological sobriety of her minimalist style only intensifies the multiple registers of this tensile persona.

With a physicality closer to performance art than to conventional cinematic narrative, *Je tu il elle* revises notions of character, not so much negating as suspending them. Akerman's performance straddles the conditions of author, director, and performer. That she uses a fictive name Julie, not for the character but to name herself as a performer in the film, subjects her signature to a peculiar dispossession: in printing the fictive name Julie in the credits along with that of an actual actor and actress, and in disregarding the need to give this "performer" a last name, Akerman declares her anonymity. This is part of the liminal phase of a stripping down of rank and status and is pervasive throughout the film. Akerman even includes the credits—that supposed neutral area, where extradiegetic data authenticate presence—in her "identity crisis"; though the mock signature "Julie" stands for "Je," or "I," and for a shifting amalgam of character, author, and performer, the effect is of slightly caricaturing a crisis that runs deep in the film.

### An Alogical Fitful, Evidence

The film actually starts by announcing its trajectory as a defection: over the first image, of a young woman sitting in a cramped room with her back

to the camera, the voice-over states, "And I left" (Et je suis partie). Thus the narrative begins in medias res and with a process of reduction. Next Chantal, as I shall from now on call Akerman as she performs in the film,[40] pursues a series of activities that are consistently repetitive and without context. Both she and the room are stripped down. For example, she moves a mattress to each corner of the room in turn, in a ceaseless shifting that constitutes an inventory of positions possible within the limited repertory imposed by fixed-frame and eye-level shooting.

The leveling down in the first part of the film is presented as a bracketed moment in which the symbolic system falters along with all forms of social placement for the character. We are given no clues about what the character does or where she comes from. Given the film's condensation of author with performer, Chantal's self-inflicted seclusion can be seen as shaping a movement of subtraction. Minimalism here becomes a willed form of defining the self. Less is more, but estrangement here is more than merely formal.

The writing in *Je tu il elle* breeds continuous mismatches in the logic of referentiality. There are always disjunctions between the description in the voice-over and what is seen on screen. Over the film's first image—a room with a bed, a desk, and the chair on which Chantal sits—we hear, "A small white room on the ground level where I rest motionless, attentive and lying on my mattress." On the "third day," which does not correspond to the third image, we see a slightly different arrangement of furniture, with Chantal sitting motionless at the desk, while the description of the fourth day, "I moved into the corridor and lay on my mattress," matches Chantal lying on the mattress and facing the camera. Then, over this same image, the voice-over says: "Empty, the room seemed large to me." Some shots are intercut through fade-ins, and some of the description is spoken over the black leader that separates the shots.

As the film progresses, Chantal is seen pushing furniture out of the room and, later, taking off her clothes. Wandering around, she gives this abstracted space the weight of an experiential space, a space of literal rather than metaphoric dispossession. These initial shots map the limits of the character's enclosure. Filming in axes perpendicular to the walls, Akerman performs a descriptive tour of each of the room's four sides. As she positions herself and the mattress in relation to the camera, she is recording herself in the process of constructing a mise-en-scène: she is physically and optically charting the space. Her single prop, the mattress, becomes a compositional element—she lies on it or sits in its shadow as it leans against the door. The simplicity of her movements and of her relationship
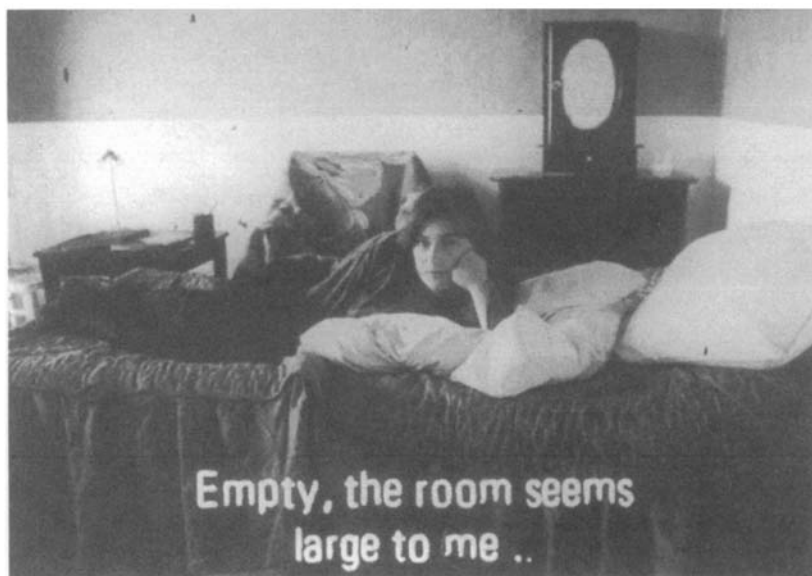
Disjointed description, Chantal Akerman in *Je tu il elle* (1974). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

with this prop can be likened to the "purposive, directed concentration" with which Rainer uses objects in her task-oriented performances.[41]

The external world is inscribed in this room by the large glass door that occupies one entire side of it. The voice-over describes a man looking into the room; a few shots later we see him passing this door (barely, though). It is also at this point that the sole line of dialogue in French *passé simple* is uttered: "Les gens ne passerent guere" (hardly anyone passed by). This tense used solely in literature places Akerman's speech suddenly on a plane of narration.[42] Changes of weather are announced and then seen through the door—"It snowed for four days." Over the fixed shots of Chantal, one also hears off-screen street sounds (car noises, children playing). This blurry external calendar is made to correspond to a hazy internal temporality—the subjective time of waiting and breathing, which suspends "logical" time. Yet the mismatch of verbal and visual description is not an expressive device. This opening section of the film is not an impressionistic account that might ultimately be co-opted as part of a subjective perspective. Quite the contrary: gradually sapping temporal referentiality, Akerman forestalls the possibility of a stable subjective view.

The film's system visibly fails to account for the precise, logical adjustments between verbal description and indexical image. As if dis-

closing the nature of her subversion—an undermining of indexicality—
Akerman relays unverifiable information: "The first day, I painted the
room blue. . . . on the second day, green," she states over the film's black
and white images. No shots can account for the truths given in the verbal
track. And the use of deictics such as "first day," "second day," "days
later," verbal pointers that mean something only in relation to a specific
person or time, increases the temporal vagueness.

Intermittently, Akerman does establish an exchange between verbal
statement and visual referent. The snow, or a man passing—images both
announced and seen—are examples of congruence. Still, even when Aker-
man uses as definite a figure as the phrase "I knew twenty-eight days had
passed" (an unequivocal reference to menstruation), the film's referen-
tiality fades into the incommensurability between description and image.
Rhythm—"I played with my breathing"—gives way to waiting. Each ac-
tivity or nonactivity ends with a pose of rest before the next image fades in.
Self-absorption alternates with frontal address, while the voice-over com-
ments ironically on the active, provocative status of waiting. Involving
duration as well as a deflection of drama and motivation, waiting serves as
a punctuation: "I spilled all the sugar over the letter, lay down, and waited.
I waited for it to pass or for something to happen, that I believe in God or
that you send me gloves to go out in the cold."

At times, the choice of a specific rhythm "depends" on the visual track,
which posits an objective reality. When Chantal states, for example, "It
started snowing and I thought life was at a standstill anyway and I had to
wait for the snow to stop and melt," she is taking her lead from the exter-
nal world. But while this verbal reference to an objective reality—the
snow stopping—seems to predicate change, objectivity has long been fis-
sured, through a consistent undermining of indexicality's power to yield
certainty.

Different levels of abstraction and of concreteness operate simultane-
ously in *Je tu il elle.* Though it is mostly in the relation of sound to image
that one becomes aware of the anchoring process of reference, both sound
and image themselves have an abstract quality. Through its abstractive
powers, verbal language designates both small and large units of diegetic
time—moments, days, the menstrual cycle. In its seemingly arbitrary con-
nection to the visual track, it creates a sense of temporal abstraction. Mean-
while, the visual track is displaying instances of real time—the precise,
singular moments of a certain activity. While one could claim an iterative
status for the relation between image and narration, the irregular ground-
ings of description indicate a truly upset temporal reference.

Conventionally, voice-over description admits multiple and different

orders of denotation. Temporality in film is usually backed up by the referential system: images confirm the truth of a stated time, through shots of clocks, for example, or times of day (morning, evening), or seasonal changes. Or, less obviously but just as conventionally, the temporal system is built on internally coherent, synchronized sets of images and statements, so that deictic expressions such as "days later" acquire a value in relation to the subject and tense of the utterance, and thus effectively advance the narrative's logic.

Deictics and shifters are the family of terms that ground the subject only as he or she utters his or her position—"I," "you," "later," or "there." In *Je tu il elle,* however, deictics and shifters suggest their own, potentially dysfunctional core; they are used toward the demise of subjectivity. The deictics and pronominal shifters in the film have an utterly subversive relation with the image. They seem to be on call, performing rituals of abeyance along with Chantal/Julie.

The pronominal abstraction of the film's title suggests Akerman's strategy of displacement. Both Chantal and the blocks of which the film is constructed (its shots and its three parts) seem to wander. The film may follow a linear order, but almost from the start, this order suggests the falsity of the notion of progression. The strict succession of days gets lost in the "defective" indexicality. In fact, the listing and the accumulation of shots and phrases, and the insistence on naming, only confuse the temporal order, suggesting an utter indifference to which shot, description, sentence, or relationship comes first or last.

Narboni suggests that *Je tu il elle* denies progression by hinting at cyclicality,[43] but the idea that Chantal's departure from her lover at the end of the film is a cyclical return to the film's initial statement—"And I left"—is, I believe, an error. As Narboni himself admits, the film has nothing to do with the cycle's common suggestion of a "falsely open product" that is in fact "perfectly static and centered."[44] Instead, Akerman's films create a sort of "simulacrum of cybernetics," issuing "a cosmogonic order of formation and engendering of the world":

> *Je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman* are semblants of the creation of the world: the first day, the second day, the third day; distribution, ordering, classification and naming, separation in time and space, introduction of disorder in order, of blockage in the eternal return, puissance of chaosmos.[45]

I have discussed this "introduction of disorder in order" in connection with *Saute ma ville* and *Jeanne Dielman.* Akerman's work simulates a

Manic addition: Chantal tacks pages onto the floor and fills up the space between Chantal and Akerman, the bed and the camera, Chantal Akerman in *Je tu il elle* (1974). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

"creation of the world" that is perversely alogical. As a careful process of naming and listing (by filmmaker and characters alike) takes precedence over what is being named, ordering turns logic into its reverse. In *Je tu il elle* as in *Jeanne Dielman,* meaningless additions of elements, gestures, and actions characterize a minimalist project of logic.

Hence the recurrently failed connections between verbal and visual reference are only the initial clue to the film's systematic disproportion. Examples of discrepancy abound. Both Chantal's obsessive eating of sugar and her writing to her lover are part of a cycle of solipsistic productivity: over shots of her at work, we hear her say in the voice-over, "I wrote him," "I wrote him three pages," "Then I wrote him six pages to say the same thing again." Quantity—of eaten sugar, pages written, camera shots—is cleaved from significance; mounting numbers don't mean progress. The vacuous accumulation of letter pages is a symptom of the "absurd nominalism" of Akerman's cinema discussed in chapter 3. Her relentless cataloguing of the gestures and shots possible within a restricted grid is another example of this alternative logic—not irrational, but overtly arational. Where logic demands a general or representative example, Akerman uses literal description. At the same time, her "absurd nominalism" ensures the equality and continuity—the textual homogeneity—of her

minute variations on gestures and actions. This surface equivalence ensures the inscription of alogical "difference" in Akerman's films.

Chantal writes three, six, eight pages, then crosses her writing out. But crossing out is simply another mise-en-scène for writing, a shift in the direction of the pencil. The actual writing process is that of the film we are watching.[46] The lack of congruity between effort and result, writing and meaning, is repeated and clarified in the sporadic connections between verbal and visual reference.

Just as important to this corroded referentiality is the abstraction of the filmic image itself, an image of lack, homogeneity, repetition—attributes of both visual and conceptual abstraction. The images in *Je tu il elle* don't cancel representation; they reveal scene and character starkly. But referentiality is imploded, for though reality is entirely apparent, even naked, it is represented as simultaneously faltering and excessive, discontinuous and repetitive, circular and nontotalizing. Overt display creates an aporia of evidence—we see all of the room, all of the character, all of the love-making—yet this "all," this totality, is denied, through the sparseness of the visual elements, the cleansing of anecdotal events and, most important, the resolute assertion of particularities.

### "Here Is": Redundant Description

The film's second part shows Chantal after she has left her room (through the glass door, which is left partly open) and taken a ride on a truck. This section is filmed mostly at night, and a switch to a grainier film stock gives it a different visual texture.[47] In the truck, Chantal occupies the edge of the frame, leaving center screen to the driver, who also does most of the talking. The voice-over gives way to extended silences broken by his long monologues. Chantal listens, her ambivalence toward him defining her dual role of participant-observer. We observe her uneasiness in "his" spaces; she stands out in the roadside bars, with their male camaraderie. The border between the two characters' social worlds is diegetically co-opted as the kind of feeling out of territorial differences that takes place in seduction scenes. And in a way this encounter can be seen as an interesting flirtation. This does not preclude, however, an additional externality: it is in this sequence, precisely because of its supposed neutrality and objectivity—what Akerman calls "the time of the Other"—that Chantal's position is most drastically represented as irreducibly double (character and director) or liminal. Her position in the frame—cornered at its fringes—is a literal embodiment of her purposely unsettled status: between director and performer, she short-circuits character.

Interestingly, the figuration of Akerman's liminality in the truck-driver scenes encompasses the realm of filmic production. In a bar, in silence, she and he intermittently watch TV; but the viewer can only tell what they're looking at by its soundtrack, which could be that of any American action series. Externality appears here as a disparity in sound quality, which the film's diegesis only barely absorbs. In the context of Europe's import of American television, and of Akerman's independent mode of film production, *Je tu il elle* gets a multilayered soundtrack only through cannibalization. In this scene the gap between her silence and an overabundance of sound (present in former scenes as she listens to the trucker's prolixity) ironically parallels the production conditions; Akerman's sparse, minimal use of sound (as much by choice as for economic reasons) is countered by a foreign excess.

In the film's first part, the alternation of subject and object is cued by a mismatch—between sound and image, profilmic and cinematic registers—that is as consistent as it is arbitrary. In the second part, the "time of reportage," syntactical disjunctions give way to a precarious absorption of Chantal's presence within the diegesis. But Akerman's deliberately failed acculturation to the trucker's milieu keeps her in a borderline position. Her unsettled status comments on ethnographic practices in cinema, first by taking "he," the truck driver (male, and from a different economic and social stratum), as the Other, second by raising the possibility of a methodological flaw. Akerman's "inquiry" continuously falters between a subjective and an objective perspective: "I felt like kissing his neck," she says, over an image of the trucker from the back, as she lies down to rest.

The integrity and contextual depth of the truck driver's monologues attest to Akerman's respectful externality.[48] Of all Akerman's writing, the truck driver's speeches are perhaps the most brilliant. As Akerman's monologues often do, they span a long stretch of time. Personal history is loaded with specificity; Akerman refuses a generic characterization, and the detailed realism of the trucker's accounts qualifies the irony of her silence and her confinement within the frame, without negating it. She underwrites his "truth" even as the obliqueness of her presence sets it in a kind of parenthesis.

This second section of the film abandons the disjunctions of the first part, but Chantal's constrained presence in the diegesis creates a kind of filmic indigestion, forcing one to recognize a liminality that is both formal and thematic. The important moment when Chantal masturbates the trucker marks the complexity of her position between performer and director. This is the single instance in the film in which she is entirely outside the frame;[49] it is also the one moment when the trucker looks

Redundant description, Niels Arestrup in *Je tu il elle* (1974). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

directly at the camera, briefly confirming her double status as both character and director.[50]

Still, this conventional antinaturalistic strategy wouldn't be as disturbing if the glance that acknowledges Akerman's place didn't follow a major reversal in the film's address. As Chantal services the trucker, Akerman exploits all the subversive potential of redundant description. Along with an on-screen narration of the action off-frame, the trucker indicates preferred rhythms for the hand job—faster, slower. After climaxing, he bends his head over the wheel and says, "I am putting my head on the wheel." This sudden conjunction of description and gesture creates a rift in the film's discourse. The redundancy of statement and action suggests a reverse kind of disjunction from the temporal disjunctions of the first part of the film, in which voice-over descriptions have named the scenes to come or just seen.

It is after this moment that the trucker looks briefly at the camera, provocatively suggesting that disjunction is not necessarily an effect of separate tracks (aural and visual) or spaces (diegetic or cinematic). If temporal disjunction and a peculiar relation between text and image are the operative tensions in the film's first part, in the second part the conjunction of gesture and description (the bending of the head and its announcement)

identifies disjunction as inherent to verbal description. The "here is" of the cinematic image is doubled. By insisting on the fragility of the index, which consistently fails to yield more than mere verisimilitude, Akerman construes a formal liminality.

*Je tu il elle* addresses the complexities of referentiality by gradually creating a truly decentering status for Akerman's image in the film. The film progressively exposes the precariousness of the presence conventionally constructed in cinema; Akerman reveals how both disjunctive and conjunctive strategies further a stable system of reference that confirms subjectivity, whether the register is realist or anti-illusionist. Instead one might suspect the film's alternate agenda and relentless pursuit by its title. Its twisted indexicality and its positing of ever more sophisticated modalities of disjunction have but one intention: to stage the representation of subjectivity as inherently relational.

### A Mock Centrality: An A-Individual Singularity

In the film's third part, the "time of relationship," Akerman completes a gradual surrendering of the control that she retains in the first two parts. Without recourse to frontal address, voice-over narration, or clinging to the edge of the frame, she refines the terms of her liminal position by switching disjunction onto her own physical and filmic presence. In this last section, she creates an internal disjunction, introducing a new pressure on the representation of the "I"—one that precludes a visible distinction between the representations of Chantal and of Akerman.

The clumsy in-sync description of an image that is also presented visually—the double "here is a head leaning on the wheel"—announces what is to come. After a mocking indexical excess, Akerman resorts to hyperindexicality. Only by resolutely placing her body center frame can she preempt the sole "completion" the film ever delivers: that of a fully displayed presence, which is, however, internally fissured.

"It's me," says Chantal, at the buzzer of an apartment presumably inhabited by someone who knows her. Later she gets a straightforward rejection: "I don't want you to stay," says the other woman to Chantal, who responds by getting up and clumsily getting her zipper stuck—"refusing" to leave. A comic formality deflects drama; seduction rituals become regressive, turning into a feeding activity punctuated by Chantal's voracity—"Encore!" she repeats. Then she puts aside her sandwich and reaches for the other woman's breast. Three long takes of their lovemaking follow, in medium long shot. The camera is placed at different distances in each of the shots.

And the quality of the women's movements in each shot defines distinct instances of passion, intimacy, and tenderness.

These shots mark a shift: in the film's first two parts, Akerman's place is peripheral; here, there is an energetic equality between the two performers. Her new centrality, however, does not fully assimilate her into the diegesis. On the contrary: the long takes, exaggerated sound, and distanced camera create a focus, a channeled spot of attention, on Chantal's performance. The difficulty of sustaining lovemaking under such scrutiny may help one understand Akerman's boldness here: the force of this scene lies in its eccentric contrast to that other mode of hyperbole, the porn film. The scene contrasts with the "inexhaustible variety of sexual rapport" that the porn film usually pursues by desperately varying its shot angles.[51] It also defies Bazin's taboo on representing sex: Bazin saw an ontological obscenity in filming unique events like death and lovemaking, and thus inscribing them in reproduction's circuit of repetition.[52]

The subversiveness of *Jeanne Dielman,* too, appears in the breaking of a realist taboo—in the murder scene, which necessarily but abruptly shifts presentation into representation. Akerman is consistent, then, in applying stress to realism's weak spots. Through a conjunction of the long take (which, for Bazin, was basic to realism's ability to ground evidence) and of literalness (realism's main quandary), *Je tu il elle* perversely pushes the love scene to the brink of a realist or pornographic obscenity.

In this the lovemaking scene is exemplary, intimating as it does a cross-examining of realism by literalness. The actuality of lovemaking is revealed to the spectator's scrutiny. And it is precisely the curiosity to see more, a curiosity vested in idealist notions of realism, that Akerman addresses in staging the record of reality—or what will be seen as reality—as a selective hyperbole. Rather than framing sex romantically, Akerman amplifies its concreteness, including both her and the other performer's body as part of the material play.[53] The scene's intensity is an effect of sheer concentration—the camera's fixed stare, the amplified sound, the shots' extended duration.[54] The scene's harshness lies in the uncompromising challenge of a literalness that undoes preconceived notions of representation—most forcefully, those of gender and sexual identity. Akerman remarks, "The scene might appear violent because it is presented as simply and naturally as if it were a relation between a man and a woman and one expects generally that one might channel the desire between two women through an explanatory scene that might justify it."[55] Her lack of such explanation, on top of her sharp display of the body, wrenches the indexical image away from serving as illustration.

Overvisible lovemaking, Chantal Akerman and Claire Wauthion in *Je tu il elle* (1974). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

*Je tu il elle* progressively asserts literalness and concreteness over cinema's main bearer of humanist and essentialist significance: the human body. Insisting to the point of excess on the body's materiality—through sound, lighting, and so on—the film upsets any possible notion of lesbian "triumphalism."[56] The sexual scenes with first the truck driver, then the female lover, have often elicited comparisons that imply a greater equality in the lesbian relationship. Judith Mayne, for instance, writes, "In contrast to the scene with the man, where Akerman appears to occupy positions on both sides of the camera simultaneously, in the scene with the woman she is quite definitely situated within the frame."[57] The description is accurate, but I would point out the covert ideological implications of the notion of a "definite" centrality, which surely suggests an idea of growth from an alienated sexual identity to a stable one.

Although one might recognize, with Mayne, Akerman's refusal to let the film be categorized as a lesbian film (a refusal indicated by the film's use of shifters in its title), the lure of a teleological reading is obviously strong. It leads in Mayne's text, to a continuous elision between defining the film's lesbian components and at the same time trying to respect Akerman's resistance to this kind of categorization. Akerman promises resolution but

never delivers it. It's true that her alleged narrative of disjunction and alienation ends on a note that simulates closure and unity. Yet to perceive the film as a "disjunct body" reaching "completion" is to assume an essentialist optic; given the ideological weight borne by the scene of the lesbian encounter, one should pay all the more attention to Akerman's strategies for avoiding an essentialist telos for both character and film.

Answering the question of whether the trucker's role as a foreigner relates to Julie's gaze as a homosexual, Akerman remarks that to pose such a question would suggest that a woman with no homosexual experience would see the trucker differently.[58] In line with this anti-essentialist claim, *Je tu il elle* persistently voids a reading of Chantal's marginality as a fixed identity. The final shot of her leaving her female lover is only one of the images that rejects an ascribed essence for her.

Akerman's shifting positionality in *Je tu il elle* clarifies the significance of the borderline behavior of characters throughout Akerman's work. Nonetheless, we have yet to address the persistent flirtation of Akerman's characters with eccentricity. It is in fact quite difficult to find an account of *Je tu il elle* that does not at some point slip into a psychoanalytic diagnosis of Chantal. What is this irresolvable crux provoked by Akerman's representation? In some readings of the film, Chantal is seen as narcissistic, a condition to which her use of the glass door of her room as a mirror is just the most obvious clue. The obsessiveness of her gestures is constantly emphasized: they are disconnected from specific objects, and there is an obvious contradiction between her excessive focus on particular activities and the irrelevance of the final results. To Brenda Longfellow, Chantal is a hysteric, whose "repeated ingestion of sugar" and "excessive outpouring of writing" constitute an attempt to fill a "psychic core of emptiness."[59] In using Kleinian terminology, Longfellow confirms the tendency present in other writings to read both character and film psychoanalytically. But the status she accords Chantal's letter as a "transitional object" is a perfect example of a psychoanalytic reading that completely disregards Akerman's minimalist strategies of interminable, "senseless" addition.[60] Similarly, in noting the ritual quality of the film's first section, Mayne remarks that "there is, simultaneously, undeniable obsessiveness as well, particularly as the compulsive eating of the sugar is concerned. The scene suggests both calm and torment, peaceful solitude and turbulence."[61]

Chantal's alternately mechanical and focused relation to food and work, as well as the connection established in the film's third part between her desire for food and her desire for her lover, have also led to extensive analysis of the mother-daughter nexus (in its dual function of nurturing

and love) in relation to homosexuality. As Mayne suggests, "This link between food and sex evokes clinical diagnoses of homosexuality as regressive, as arrested development, as the desire—for women—to fuse with the maternal object."[62]

Such diagnoses are utterly essentialist and normative. They posit Chantal as bearer of, or lacking in, motivation, as if she preexisted her filmic representation. Minimalism's tactics of disproportion—its ateleological serial gestures, for instance—are translated within the restricted terms of expressive transparency. Thus a formal and behavioral radicality—expressed as repetitions of gestures, actions, and procedures—is given a negative valence, becoming that which is abnormal, alienated, irrational.

After Mayne recognizes what evokes "the radical otherness of lesbian identity" in *Je tu il elle,* she quickly acknowledges that "Akerman affirms the significance of 'regressive' orality as informative of, rather than working against, female representation and creativity—whether these take the form of writing a letter or making a film."[63] If, in short, Chantal displays recognizable pathological traits, it is crucial to see how these traits posit an alternative representation of subjectivity. The bareness of the ambiance, the lack of clues by which Chantal's body can be situated in a social space, intimates an abstraction that is immediately contradicted by her various obsessive tics—truly idiosyncratic gestures. Akerman's stylized poses and framings, as well as her character's unsettled status within the diegesis, preclude the recognition of a pattern through which these repeated gestures and activities could be stabilized as instances of an identifiable state or condition. The tics of character or of author cannot be pinned to a motivational structure and thus resist the notion of exemplarity, or of a singularity ultimately co-opted as eccentricity.

*Je tu il elle* is not a rite of passage; it does not suggest an increased socialization in Chantal. Rather, it proposes an instability between private and collective, internal and external, subject and object, author and character. The rift between the aural and the visual tracks in the film's first part suggests a gap between two formal logics that are suspended and made incongruous throughout the film. Indeed, *Je tu il elle* procures less the shock of disjunction than an interstitial space between the disparate logics of abstraction and indexicality, anonymity and systems of nomenclature. The characters' sole identification is through their position vis-à-vis each other. Pronominal shifters can thus be seen as posing a question immediately relevant for the performative disarray in *Je tu il elle:* one relative to a subject/object position.

The shifter presents an instance of liminality between concept and in-

dex similar to that characterizing Akerman's cinema. The wavering be-
tween the figurative and the literal registers of an image are in this sense
one of the most marked instances of this structuring ambivalence. While
shifters and deictics purportedly give access to a precise presence—that of
a subject, event, or object—they actually exist only as an instance of dis-
course, that is, of utterance. A shifter has only a "momentary reference."[64]
Yet by upholding this precarious index of presence, *Je tu il elle* promotes
the very instability that lies at the core of the representation of the subject.
Moreover, the film's reliance on the shifter suggests the possibility of a
representation that would transform the very idea of individuality. For its
perverse insistence on a discontinuous indexicality constantly reminds us
of the paradox Benveniste found in the shifter:

> [Shifters] do not refer to a concept or to an individual. . . . there is no
> concept 'I' that incorporates all the I's that are uttered at every moment
> in the mouths of all speakers. . . . How could the same term refer
> indifferently to any individual whatsoever and still at the same time
> identify him in his individuality?[65]

The reach of Akerman's formal politics lies in her response to Ben-
veniste's question, a response that does not stop at the paradoxes of a
logical or linguistic order: she answers by proposing a liminal represen-
tation of subjectivity. Akerman takes to task the issue undergirding the
shifter: that of the potential indifferentiation, or generality, contained in
the very signifier of individuality. Hence the film's title and its perfor-
mance of momentary references are far from innocent. In fact, through
Chantal's combination of anonymity and eccentricity, *Je tu il elle* advo-
cates an a-individual singularity. Akerman's representation of liminality
secures both the communitarian qualities of homogeneity and anonymity
(signaled in the film by the blurred signifiers of place, class, etc.) and the
singularity (represented through Julie's eccentricity) that propels the indi-
vidual to an expansion of social limits. Should a definition of this sin-
gularity still seem vague, Narboni sketches what its discourse might be:
"discourse in the fourth person of the singular, that is, neither a histrionics
of subjectivity (the "I") nor the despotism of the interpolation or demand
(the "you"), nor the objectifying horror of the nonperson ("he/she")."[66]

Akerman's insistence on her characters' quirks, as well as on their literal
representation, challenges the universal status of totalizing representa-
tions. There is no one quite like her, this "her" being a pure cinematic
being destined to behavioral and stylistic repetition, structured through a
series of shots that defy conceptual reduction through their "absurd nomi-

nalism" as well as through photographic indexicality. On the other hand, the utter impossibility of a "pure" indexicality, without abstractive or conceptual resonances, is acknowledged and staged in Akerman's film as the drama of the shifter. The question becomes, How much formal abstraction can these bodily presences stand without becoming ciphers of meaning? And how does Akerman's style—her minimalist reductions, sound amplifications, and so on—alter the very core of the representation of individuality? These questions, confronted a year later in *Jeanne Dielman*, are discussed in the next chapter.

# 5 "HER" AND JEANNE DIELMAN

## Type as Commerce

*In the works of a great realist everything is linked up with everything else. Each phenomenon shows the polyphony of many components, the intertwinement of the individual and social, of the physical and the psychical, of private interest and public affairs. And because the polyphony of their compositions goes beyond immediacy, their dramatis personae are too numerous to find room in the playbill.*
—Georg Lukács[1]

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.[2]

For Barthes, a myth (or a "mytheme") is a unit of signification that is ready to be appropriated as a signifier in a different context. It is an image made pregnant by prior sociocultural inscriptions and usages. The charged, layered nature of a mytheme such as housewife/prostitute is suited in different ways to both Godard's semio-philosophical quest and Akerman's hyperrealism. A comparison of Akerman's fixed focus on Jeanne Dielman with the ambitious compass that *Two or Three Things*

proposes for "her" (the actress Marina Vlady, the character Juliette Janson, and the city of Paris) suggests the filmmakers' different processes. Because the housewife/prostitute mytheme condenses sociocultural meanings that go beyond literal injunctions, because, in short, it carries with it a history, I want to explore how Godard and Akerman's cinematic strategies and political and aesthetic contexts inflect their use of this image as the initial layer for their representation of type. In part, Akerman's work is a reshaping of the notion of the hero advanced by neorealist cinema. The neorealist aesthetic (at least as propounded by Zavattini and De Sica) is anchored, like Akerman's hyperrealist aesthetics, by a proscription of metaphoric links and of visual or aural associations. The focus on a specific space and time and the desire to avoid ellipsis lead to an exclusive attention on a single character. Thus topicality not only becomes synonymous with a restricted spatial and temporal focus but exemplifies neorealism's narrow political potential for full representativeness. Bazin's acknowledgment that in neorealism "only rarely are the masses seen as a positive social force," and that when the masses are represented it is as a foil for the hero, to bring out "the theme of the man in the crowd,"[3] leads Pascal Bonitzer to claim that "to recognize this is the same as to say that the hero of neorealism is a petit-bourgeois, which is indeed the case."[4]

Neorealist rhetoric is shaped by a binomy of indignation and solidarity—perhaps a necessary segue through the postwar situation. The inflammatory heroization of the anonymous individual found in most of Zavattini's manifestos is a direct effect of a postwar climate in which the notion of the hero still retained currency. The neorealist construction of the "typical" depends on a changing ground. Seen against the backdrop of multiple markers of adversity, neorealism's characters are shown to remain loyal to their plight and principles. As we watch Umberto's plight unfold over the few days covered in *Umberto D*, we follow a series of situations meant to delineate Umberto's personal qualities—his dignity, his love for his dog, his care for Maria—as constant against the various difficulties he encounters. Thus the variations in site, character, and situation serve as a foil for the authentication of worker and petit bourgeois in a restricted, unalterable, humanist repertory of behavior and morale.[5] For Bazin, what underlies neorealism is a sensitivity to social issues, but his perceptive analysis of *Umberto D* reveals the quality of the neorealist hero's engagement:

> Since the real time of the narrative is not that of the drama but the concrete duration of the character, . . . the film is identical with what the actor is doing and with this alone. The outside world is reduced to be-

ing an accessory to this pure action, which is sufficient to itself in the same way that algae deprived of air produce the oxygen they need.[6]

The relations between the "outside world" and the character's "pure action" epitomize realism's political dimension, its avowed desire to engage reality. This trade between the individual and his or her social sphere underlies the main issue addressed here: the representativeness of a given character—the notion of type.

My revision of the notion of type calls for an investigation of the context of Jeanne Dielman's existence, and of her cinematic shape. I will rely on a comparative analysis of *Two or Three Things* and *Jeanne Dielman,* always bearing in mind the protagonist's centrality in these films, and how this centrality is transacted through a cultural and social politics.

Both *Jeanne Dielman* and *Two or Three Things* qualify the notion that the outside world is merely "accessory." This seems most obvious in Godard's inclusion of a vast range of realities in his collage films, but it is equally important in *Jeanne Dielman;* it is crucial to recognize how Akerman's relentless focus on Jeanne generates more than a "totally subjective perspective." Lest the relations between the social world and the individual seem facilitated by Godard's centrifugal aesthetics and hampered by Akerman's hyperbolic focus, I will investigate how Akerman brackets and redistributes personal and social history, channeling this economy of disjunction through Jeanne's body.

*Jeanne Dielman* contains few secondary characters or groups who might amplify the scope or the representativeness of Jeanne's daily life. This sparseness, however, charges Jeanne's presence with social resonance. Every action and utterance is refracted through her. And her opaque physicality accumulates the charge of other, transient characters. (The clients, of course, are the very image of transience, "depositing" their bodies and cash with Jeanne, then leaving.)

The dialogue with the neighbor at the door is especially significant here. While in a first version of the film's script this and other characters appeared in subplots, here the neighbor remains unseen. We hear her talking to Jeanne through the half-open door. The scene presents the same disjunction between a voice and its source that we get in the film's monologuelike dialogues: an excess of information and a monotone delivery dissociate speech from the speaker. The neighbor's monologue describes a visit to the butcher and parades her doubts about what to buy, her child's day-care, her husband's approval; it concentrates to the point of hyperbole the triviality of a woman's quotidian decisions. This is certainly the prin-

cipal instance in which we perceive Jeanne's life as it is shared by other women. Akerman's skewed representation of a collective identity reveals how radically she redistributes the weight of her narrative and the valence of its characters, giving Jeanne a presence that inevitably comes to be seen as representative.

Godard's films demand montage, Akerman rearranges continuity editing in an economical, minimal display intercut by doors and elisions. Where Godard adds, Akerman subtracts. Yet both are deeply interested in the effects of accumulation. We need to see how both filmmakers' use of a type charged with prior social inscriptions (housewife/prostitute) is inflected by their political and aesthetic contexts.

### For Example, "Her": Godard and the "Natural" Sign

*During the course of the film—in its discourse, its discontinuous course, that is—I want to include everything, sports, politics, even groceries.*—Jean-Luc Godard[7]

*Two or Three Things* seems to respond, two years after the fact, to the French ministry of culture's demand that Godard change the title of his film *Une femme mariée* (A married woman, 1964) to *La femme mariée* (The married woman), so that the film would be seen as dealing not with French women in general but with a particular woman. Other modernist realists besides Godard—Flaubert with *Madame Bovary*, Brecht with *Kuhle Wampe*—had had to confront the law over the issue of a character's social representativeness.[8] Godard agreed to change his title in 1964, but *Two or Three Things* engages the reduction implicit in the change by addressing the issue of type directly. Godard makes Juliette a collective paradigm so that his film, an amplification of a case study, might have the status of a sociological essay. He said, "The story of Juliette in *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* will not be told continuously, because not only she, but the events of which she is part, are to be described. It is a matter of describing 'a complex.' "[9]

Godard's avowed desire to describe a " 'complex' and its parts," and the choice of a character to be examined "in greater detail to suggest that the other parts also exist in depth,"[10] would at first seem to follow the nineteenth-century literary codes of the realist type as analyzed by Georg Lukács. For Lukács, the successful realist novelist exposes "the multifarious interrelationships between the character traits of his heroes and the objective general problems of the age."[11] And indeed, Juliette Janson "grapples with the most abstract issues of the time as [her] own personal

and vital problems."[12] Yet it is for a number of reasons impossible to make Godard's type fit Lukács's unremittingly essentialist type entirely. To Lukács, for example, an abstract view of reality must be anchored in a subjective center, in a "character's point of view." For a "character's *own* capacity for intellectual generalization degenerates into empty abstraction if the relationship between abstract thinking and personal experience escapes the reader, if we do not experience this relationship along with the character."[13]

Lukács's two-pronged attack on naturalism and modernism illuminates how both these literary movements upset an essentialist conception of realism. Discussing Zola's writings and his method of observation, Lukács indicts "the leveling inherent in the descriptive method": "The loss of inner significance and hence of any epic order and hierarchy among objects and events does not stop at mere leveling. . . . something much worse . . . results—a reversed order of significance, a consequence implicit in the descriptive method since *both the important and the unimportant are described with equal attention*"[14] (my italics). Not only does the descriptive allow an unwelcome eruption of the minor, the quotidian, then, it gives narrative an anti-anthropomorphic unbalance, decentering the essenialist thrust of Lukácsian realism.[15]

Godard's films remain compendia of everything that offends the Lukácsian doxa. Godard's main transgression of the essentialist conception of character lies in his desire to put everything in cinema, his savage equalization of different realities. He gives description a truly decentering, anti-hierarchical power, probing the surface and the details of a scene both verbally and visually. But it is finally the superimposition of this impulse over the image of a human being, and the utter fragmentation provoked by this imposition, that most bluntly defaces the intellectual physiognomy of the Lukácsian character.

In representing Juliette as split between a not-so-interior interiority and an equally flat exteriority, Godard defiles the basis of essentialist realism: a character's "own" motivations.[16] He shifts constantly among different registers of address—direct dialogue within the diegesis, obtuse dialogue across the camera, the relay of feelings through interior monologues that almost "touch" the next, matter-of-fact sentence ("I'll come by at 6 p.m."). These devices are so nuanced and unexpected as to implode any possible "organic" or "integral" portrait (though they could equally be seen as reaching for a total depiction). Juliette's references to fragmentation, to indifference, are significant here: they direct one not only to a precise notion of alienation in modern society but also to the body's inability to accommodate so much meaning.

The antipsychological thrust of both Godard's heterogeneity and Aker-man's homogeneity is not incompatible with an alternate sort of human-ism. Crucial to understanding Godard's and Akerman's anti-essentialist humanism is the issue of type, which is suggested by the decentering centrality that both *Two or Three Things* and *Jeanne Dielman* accord the figure of the woman.

Although Lukács's attack on modernism helps considerably in under-standing the threats that tactics of decentering pose in representation gen-erally, we are focusing here on the peculiarities of cinema. We therefore return, with some urgency, to one of our major concerns: how can cinema represent a concept, idea, or collective group through the particularizing agency of its indexical image and sound? To address this question prop-erly, I should restate my specific interest: the shared ground between the desire to investigate everyday life in modern society and the channeling of this cinematic inquiry through a female protagonist.

As Denise Riley has argued, the very concept of "women" as a collective entity has historically had to carve out its wavering identity in parallel to, and at times in the cracks of, the concept of humanism. This is still the structuring impasse of feminism.[17] So I want to refocus the problematics of type and of humanism through an investigation of the specific cinematic uses of "woman," the particular that, in its reach for a plural representa-tiveness ("women"), poses the greatest instability to traditional humanis-tic notions. The particularities of a character or of a person's identity are compounded in cinema by the indexical nature of the photographic image, by cinema's resistance to abstraction and conceptualization. This is the crux confronted by Godard's and Akerman's cinema.

The epigrammatic force of *Jeanne Dielman* with its simultaneous pro-posal of an image for a woman's quotidian and of an alternate, conception of type, suggests three interrelated questions. The first concerns the cul-tural determinants that link an individual woman to an alienating social corpus (urban capitalist society, the middle class); the second relates to how a social critique can be advanced through this nexus. The third ques-tion, seemingly residual to the other two, is nonetheless crucial: what is left of the woman (and *for* the woman) after her use as type? Or, better, what remains of the particularities of "woman" after abstractive processes push her image into a web of signification predetermined by the specific agendas "she" must serve? Given the placement of the woman in their films, both Godard and Akerman must answer these questions.

My privileging of particularities issues from an instinctual aversion to emblematic representation, to ciphers of meaning embedded in concrete images. This aversion approximates Bazin's proscriptions on the meta-

phoric and the abstract in cinema. Yet the lure of the residual—present in such expressions as Rosselini's "irrelevant detail," Bazin's "little fact,"— has been my main target in criticizing the totalizing bent of neorealism. As I argued earlier, neorealism only reinstates another sort of allegorical representation: its embrace of the concrete feeds an abstract yet anthropomorphic entity, the Human Being.

With this proviso about my leanings toward the particular and the concrete in representation, the issue remains how concrete the concrete is in cinema. I will trace this question by tentatively mapping a growing recognition that particularities are as much a parallel effect of abstraction (since we remain in the realm of language and representation) as they are its residual essence.

Let us start, then, with *Two or Three Things*. Godard drew the idea and some of the material for the film from a study on prostitution in big housing complexes that was published in two issues of the *Nouvel Observateur*.[18] Both newspaper article and film make explicit connections among the reurbanization plan of the city of Paris, the government's decision to build housing complexes, and the desire to buy consumer goods. An idealized image of comfort, they argue, is always sold at a slightly higher price than new residents of the housing complexes can afford; hence the need for occasional prostitution. Prostitution is seen, then, as a pervasive consequence of the boosting of the capitalist economy and its promise of comfort in mid-'60s France.

*Two or Three Things* displays one of Godard's favorite theses: selling out is so pervasive in capitalist society that prostitution is its proper allegorical manifestation. Godard claims, however, that if he "filmed a prostitute it was to put the fact [that the Paris region was administered as a brothel] in evidence," for he could have made a film "about a worker or technician . . . who [in doing for money what he doesn't want to do] behaves no differently three quarters of the time."[19] Since Godard thinks he could have made his point through other alienated types besides a female occasional prostitute, his choice of character demands particular attention.

Omitting to question his decision to focus on a woman, Godard casts that decision as "natural." Actually, the idea of prostitution as exemplary had considerable currency in the extensive mid-'60s analyses of everyday life as a site of alienation. The connection of prostitution with capitalism is inflected by the remnants of a left-wing puritanism. A cluster of themes informs it, most of them appearing in the links discovered by semioticians and sociologists among the fetishization of commodities, "femininity," fashion, and women. Laura Mulvey and Colin MacCabe comment on the

fact that Godard continuously slides "between an investigation of the images of woman and an investigation which uses those images"[20] in a highly problematic semiotic trade: "Godard's analysis of the place of the image in relation to consumption . . . succeeds in linking the oppression of capitalism and the alienation of sexuality. . . . although it shows up the close relations between sexuality and an economic system, it finally reproduces the equation between woman and sexuality, which at another level it displaces."[21] Mulvey's and MacCabe's critique is corroborated in at least two discourses that are basic to Godard's mid-'60s representations of women. One is Henri Lefebvre's sociological inquiry into everyday life; the second is the semiotic and structuralist appropriation of woman as sign, as "exchange value."

Lefebvre, in his *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1971), refers to women in a clear attempt to ground the notion of the quotidian in social specificity. These remarks, however, take up only two pages of a 206-page book. He says, "Everyday life weighs heaviest on women. . . . they have their substitutes and they are substitutes . . . ; they are the subject of everyday life and its victims . . . and it is at their cost that substitutes [beauty, femininity, fashion, etc.] thrive."[22] Lefebvre may acknowledge that an understanding of woman as both consumer and consumed is fundamental to the reading of a "bureaucratic society for controlled consumption," but he is enmeshed in a theoretical blur that somehow makes the victim of a social development its main signifier, and even, perhaps unwittingly, its cause. Lefebvre wants to link consumer society with the "collapse of referentials"—the free floating of signs (his examples are "smile" and "nudity") voided of their referents, yet activating the desire to consume. But his analysis proceeds through attributes associated with the "feminine," and his characterization of women as sign is inherently moralistic.

Supposedly to describe the actual situation of women in consumer society, Lefebvre uses the term "substitute" to install women in an arbitrary circuit of commerce. But the arbitrariness of this economy is a stretch, carried over from the assumption in semiological inquiry that the sign is nothing more than a conventional, "arbitrary" notation. Far less arbitrary here are what William Empson calls "compacted doctrines": doctrines taken for granted, terms or mythemes—woman as consumer/consumed, for example—that are "pregnant" from prior use. As Empson writes in *The Structure of Complex Words,* "What needs attention are the assumptions of the period," the background of ideas that allows one to understand a particular usage of a word without dissociating it from the "doctrine" or "practical politics" it carries.[23] The peculiar positioning of woman as "ex-

change value," for example, can be shown to result from a problematic mix of anthropology and structural analysis. Claude Lévi-Strauss's defense of himself on charges of misogyny reveals some of the contours of that mix; he writes, in *Structural Anthropology* (1958),

> Of course it may be disturbing to some to have women conceived as mere parts of a meaningful system. However, one should keep in mind that the process by which phonemes and words have lost . . . their character of value to become reduced to mere signs will never lead to the same results in matters concerning women. For words do not speak, while women do; as producers of signs, women can never be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens.[24]

Quoting this disclaimer in her essay "Woman as Semiotic Object,"[25] Christine Brooke-Rose responds to it in much the same way that Mulvey and MacCabe respond to Godard, and that I do to Lefebvre's problematic sandwiching of "women" in his moralizing discussion of "femininity" and alienation in everyday life. Brooke-Rose deconstructs the apparently innocent association between woman and sign:

> I am naturally not arguing against [Lévi-Strauss's] description of the facts in the societies studied. . . . I am merely noting a certain relish in those facts and, here, an amusing speciousness and bad faith in the arguments used in defense, which even attributes the "ambiguity" [i.e., the confusion of values with signs, as in my polemic] to the reactions of those who protest.[26]

Inflecting Godard's "consumption" of woman as sign is the generalizing spread of semiological analysis into sociology that took place from the mid '50s to the mid '60s, a trend enmeshed with a humanism informed mostly by Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology. Both are clearly present in *Two or Three Things,* perhaps the last "perfect" staging of these discourses' harmony. On the other hand, it is symptomatic that Godard's work comes at a point where an immersion in daily politics—the major militant mode of the late '50s, and a way to counter the idealism of the postwar period—mixes with the '60s critique of consumer society. Analyzing Godard's use of the figure of the prostitute, John Kreidl distinguishes between Godard's sensitivity to women as sociological entities and his attempts to document the "fictionality" of such star actresses as Brigitte Bardot.[27] Godard's enthrallment "with the reality/irreality split evinced by the average middle-class woman of Western culture in the 1950's"[28] can

be historicized as the need on the part of intellectuals within patriarchal culture to come to terms with their own complex mingling of Marxist-inflected morality and fascination with image consumption.

The double investment of *Two or Three Things* in the sign and in the figure of the prostitute deserves sustained attention.[29] Godard's cinematic and sociological formation leads him to investigate woman as sign on two levels: her transient agency as both actress and real person occupying a floating place in consumer society. It was part of Godard's process in *Two or Three Things* to make Vlady answer impromptu questions that he asked off camera. These reflex responses give her frontal addresses and replies a tone of forced confession. Turned into a sign of society's alienating power, woman is on trial. Turned into a cinematic sign, she has to answer to more than her position as alienated consumer; she has to answer to her lack of agency.

Godard's heterogeneous aesthetics shape an allegorical figuration whose main term is Vlady's body. It is particularly significant that this body is both used as a relay of registers and meanings and characterized as that of a woman and occasional prostitute. For allegories can only be formed through imagery that is "pregnant," and that has been severed from its original context and motivation. Only a body whose agency is bracketed can allow the "allegorical transmutation of agency into imagery."[30]

Thus Godard's film faces an aporia intrinsic to allegory as a structuring mode. Vlady/Juliette is grasped as a capitalized "Her" that also signifies both city and brothel. This signifying buildup demands that the collusion of Vlady's body with that of a prostitute be taken as both expected and historically produced. To the degree that the objects of Godard's semiological and social analysis are media imagery and alienation, one can see him as replaying Barthes's critique of the image's transformation into myth. Myth makes a cultural and historical moment "natural," misrepresenting it by asserting its ahistoricity, and making it stand either as an exception or as a too-generic assertion. By providing the particulars of a certain history, Godard aims to disable the notion of naturalness. Godard's haste to report on something happening actualizes and re-presents Barthes's dissection of myth.

Half seriously, Godard once remarked that as a document, his film could have been commissioned by Paul Delouvrier, the man responsible for the reurbanization plan. Actually, Godard's participation in his historical moment was indeed so concrete as to beget, if not a government commission, then a role in a public debate on prostitution with J. S. Geours, an eco-

nomic official of the French government. This televised debate, broadcast
with an interview with a drug addict and occasional prostitute, is telling
not only of Godard's rhetorical abilities but of his strategic concerns.

First, Geours argues that drug addiction and prostitution are atypical
exceptions bearing no relation to society at large. Then, sensing the shaki-
ness of his ahistorical position, he adds a generic comment on a distant
historical moment: occasional prostitution for economic reasons in the
nineteenth century. By contrast, Godard, the agent of Geours's defensive-
ness, is relentlessly topical. Not only does he argue for the typicality of
occasional prostitution, he relates it, through two real-life examples cited
in his film, to a specific social and historical circumstance. He also reveals
his own subjective reaction, insisting that what is shocking to him is that,
unlike Geours, he finds these cases "natural"—logical consequences of a
social formation. What is shocking to him, Godard claims, is that he is not
shocked.

Here I'd like to pause: Godard doesn't stress the "naturalness" of these
two cases of prostitution simply to unmask Geours's hypocrisy. I began
by questioning the "naturalness" with which Godard took the image of
a woman, housewife, and occasional prostitute as an allegory for the so-
cial condition of France in the mid '60s. Now I'd like to read this em-
phasis on "naturalness" as the very crucible of Godard's complexity as a
filmmaker.[31]

A number of analyses of *Two or Three Things* deal at length with God-
ard's approach to the "natural" image, referring specifically to the con-
stant questioning of the indexical and analogical images that defines his
anti-illusionist stance.[32] Certainly a principal meeting point between God-
ard and Barthes is their shared attention to the insidious "rhetoric of the
image," and particularly of the photographic image directed toward con-
sumption. But there is another, perhaps equally important way in which
Barthes can help us understand Godard.

In 1975, in a short note titled "Ambiguous Praise of the Contract,"[33]
Barthes wrote, "Since this contract [by which language, narrative, and
society all function] is generally masked, the critical operation consists in
deciphering the confusion of reasons, alibis, appearances, in short, the
whole of the social *natural* . . . to make manifest the controlled exchange
on which the semantic process and collective life are based."[34] He contin-
ues, "At another level the contract is . . . a bourgeois value which merely
legalizes a kind of economic talion." And "at the same time . . . the con-
tract is ceaselessly desired as the justice of a world finally 'regular.' "[35] To
problematize the quandary furthered by these latter meanings of the con-

tract (contradictions less easily resolved than the deconstruction of myths he mentions first), Barthes too resorts to an idea of the "naturalness" of prostitution: "The model of the good contract is the contract of prostitution. For this contract, declared immoral by all societies and by all systems, liberates in fact from what might be called the *imaginary embarrassments of the exchange*"[36] (my italics). The force of this argument lies in its suggestion of a reality that seems to elude deconstruction. It introduces prostitution as *the natural contract,* its naturalness invalidating the hypocrisy of all other contracts as it assumes an exchange without moral constraints.

Like Barthes, Godard recognizes the impossibility of unmasking all contracts. This is the thrust of his response to Geours. But, also like Barthes, he has to qualify his praise of the contract (understood here as ranging from linguistic to social contracts); it has to be "ambiguous." By the mid '60s, and in the context of his existential Marxism, Godard cannot be purely cynical, cannot condone "naturalness" *tout court* as the limit of demythification. He profits from the "naturalness" of prostitution to enhance his agonistic impulses. His stance is inherently demythologizing, taking the ambivalence of this contract-made-nature—prostitution—and representing it as a historical and economic contingency.

Two apparently contradictory movements are in place here. One is an overloading of signification through a cumulative process that merely reproduces myth.[37] The second, brilliantly staged through Godard's urgent, secretive, complicitous tone of voice in *Two or Three Things,* represents subjectivity as history incarnate—as absolute contemporaneity. His whispered comments and the precise economic and sociological data they provide seem to complement Juliette's voided quality, her weariness, and propose an alternative to them. What can be seen as a facile, even equivocal use of the mytheme of the housewife/prostitute can be reread as the needed counterpoint for a historical and subjective consciousness presented as endangered.

This is finally how the film embodies a phenomenological humanism. Godard represents reality as it loses its power to shock, as it slides from a precise historical conjunction into an allegorized and frozen image of capital. That he simultaneously allegorizes the individual and the artist as subversive potentials only enhances the film's pathos. *Two or Three Things* has to balance a critique of society with a generalizing humanism, and this compromise necessitates a "naturalness" that is didactically displayed first as myth, then as its breakdown. Clearly a woman's quotidian—and its reverse, prostitution—constitutes an image potent enough to sus-

tain a representation with social and political overtones in both 1966 and 1975. But Godard and Akerman differently address the "naturalness" of this mytheme. A feminist position on the thematics of housewife and prostitute is perforce distinct from Godard's. A feminist's consideration of the couplet "housewife/prostitute" is predetermined by gender solidarity, as attested to by feminism's various debates on prostitutes' legal and medical rights.[38] These discussions always exempt the woman from guilt, whereas the sociological inquiries of the '50s and early '60s (Lefebvre being a strong example), subject her to a peculiar casting of doubt. Feminists might use the dyad "housewife/prostitute" politically and rhetorically, but they can never reduce it to a metaphor.

### Jeanne Dielman: An Exceptional Typicality

At this point we should chart how other cultural and political manifestations contemporaneous with Akerman's deal with a collective representation for "women."

When Akerman made *Jeanne Dielman*, the Belgian feminist movement had been more active every year since 1972. Among other things, it had mounted yearly demonstrations on issues ranging from contraception to working conditions, strikes, and abortion rights. Besides creating gathering places, *maisons des femmes*, in every major city, feminists had founded the magazine *Les Cahiers du grif*, described by Jacqueline Aubenas-Bastie as aiming "to endow feminism not only with a theoretical apparatus but to support the latter on the experiential sphere, on the witnessed fact. . . . not to make a journal of academic research cut out from reality but to sustain this effort through the spontaneous expression of quotidian, of the 'me, I.'" By 1975, the burgeoning (nonelected) feminist party had organized a congress that had outlined a nineteen-point doctrine on discrimination, the right to work, housewife salary, and other topics. The list included a demand of worker status for prostitutes.[39]

In 1974, a special issue of the French journal *Les Temps Modernes* (*Les Femmes s'entetent*, edited by Simone de Beauvoir) charted some of the period's shared feminist concerns. Most essays consisted of sociological inquiries into the space reserved for women. Describing housework as unpaid labor, the magazine argued that women were caught in a double work schedule.[40] In parallel to the consciousness-raising movement in the United States, and to the privileging of the "me, I" in Belgium, French feminism had its own confessional mode. Several of the short essays in this special issue are entitled "rêves" (dreams), implying a utopian per-

Jeanne "forgets," Delphine Seyrig in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of New Yorker Films.

spective, or at least a different realm of complaint. The issue is striking for its contributors' anonymity, a political tactic intended mainly as a refusal of the patronym, which reproduces a male order. More than half the writers sign only their first names. They also foreground a lyrical personal voice (sometimes bordering on the inane) and resolutely avoid theory. One Nicole, for instance, writes, "The domain of women is that of the table, of nourishment, of the potato. It is the base vegetable, the least expensive, the one spoken about the least, but which is peeled and arranged in a thousand ways. How am I going to serve the potatoes this evening?"[41]

This brief essay, published in the same year that Akerman was working on *Jeanne Dielman,* parallels her interest in repeated chores. Peeling potatoes stands as a terse image of dailiness and repetition. Nicole's language reflects this relation by citing a roster of activities: "Wash, iron, saw, turn off the taps, open them, heat, clean, take out, put back again . . . buy, eat, throw out, put in order, derange," and finally "forget." Repetition is seen, then, as creating a pragmatic amnesia—the lack of personal and historical awareness that is necessary to keep women functioning. The only way to keep repeating is to forget.

The notion of forgetting, then, is part of a critical vocabulary in feminist rhetoric. But, as we've seen, Akerman defers judgment on Jeanne's routine. She beautifully equivocates the issue of the character's lack of awareness by formally filing all Jeanne's behavior under the rubric not of "forgetfulness" but of "potato." Thus she asserts a skewed solidarity with

her character, a complicity that places her use of the housewife/prostitute mytheme in a different register from Godard's.

In *Jeanne Dielman*, the impulse to record the minutiae of everyday life, the recovering of "images between images," accords perfectly with a feminist sensibility. Yet other things are equally important in the film: a plot that almost epitomizes a certain radical-feminist discourse (a passive oppression and a quotidian obliviousness are disrupted by a woman's violent action—murder); the use of an image made pregnant by prior usages (the housewife/prostitute mytheme); and the use of the actress Delphine Seyrig, whose image reverberates with earlier European art cinema.

Akerman's choice of subject in *Jeanne Dielman* (as in *Toute une Nuit* and later *The Golden Eighties*) fleshes out hyperrealism as a positive strategy. Addressing a situation that has charged social ramifications but is exhausted by its previous use (i.e., the alienated life of the housewife/ prostitute), Akerman proposes an alternate mode of undoing the myth: that of hyperbolic complicity. As in *Two or Three Things*, a supplementary mythification erupts, one in accordance with her own film's period: activating the assumptions of the time, Jeanne's "pregnant" quality registers her as a victim of patriarchy. She epitomizes the feminist heroine, not only because she takes action (the murder) but because, by taking the label of housewife/prostitute, she is already defined within a specific feminist repertoire. That label already has a different valence than in *Two or Three Things*.

It is important to place *Jeanne Dielman* in this precise moment, in which Akerman presciently embraces the structure and skeleton of a feminist rhetoric and thematics at the same time that her representational hyperrealism disallows a freezing of "compacted doctrines" and "pregnant images." Played over the dichotomy of housewife/prostitute, Akerman's focus on a woman's quotidian is dictated by the need to reclaim singularity for a reality bordering, by its prior use, on the category of the exemplary. She performs this deliberate piercing of a pregnant image through her detailed representation of her central character.

One of the main differences in this shift of "pregnancy" has to do with Akerman's imprint of her own feminine and subjective values in the film. On a number of occasions, she has recalled the memory of seeing the same gestures performed again and again by the women of her family. That memory must be allowed to inform a comparison of Jeanne's kitchen work with that of two characters elsewhere: Maria in *Umberto D*, Juliette in *Two or Three Things*. In *Umberto D*, Maria's kitchen activities fill the temporal gap in the purportedly uninterrupted attention to Umberto. The scene

occupies exactly the time it takes the ambulance to come for Umberto after his phone call. The effort to shift the hierarchy of meaningful scenes lies as much in the extended focus on Maria's mundane activities as in the ways in which expressive shots of Maria analyze a subjective crisis (her pregnancy), preparing us to perceive Umberto's own drama with more acuity.[42] As opposed to the dramatic effect procured through the uneventful neorealist kitchen, Godard creates a quotidian that is allegorized, cramped with allusions to major political and social issues. He uses the kitchen as stagy scenery for one of Vlady's first frontal addresses. The aural background for this scene is a typical male focus, politics—a radio broadcast about Vietnam. Juliette has to fulfill her domestic duties, but as she washes the dishes she turns toward the camera in a flat performance that seems a comment on TV commercials. Godard intercepts this serious quotidian with a sense of physical and existential fatigue: Juliette is tired. But the scene's most striking aspects are its array of kitchen products—some of which reappear, spread over a green lawn, at the film's end. Economy is the issue that suspends the film's narrative flow, becoming in fact its main theme as the urge or need to consume is first indicated in Juliette's kitchen.

The notion of the mytheme as a unit of signification ready to be allocated as a signifier is certainly appropriate to Godard's semio-philosophical quests. Akerman's work complicates this notion. Her use of the ready-made image of housewife/prostitute at first seems congruent with her hyperrealism, for her use of an image charged with prior meaning creates a second-degree representation. But the hyperrealism of *Jeanne Dielman* is inflected by feminism and lays out a new position in relation to it. For what finally places Akerman's work in a productive relation with feminist politics is less the recording of repressed images of women's movements than it is the way in which, by redesigning our attention to these movements and reshaping the gestures themselves, she questions an essentialist view of woman.

*Jeanne Dielman* subverts the notion of the representative type by asserting it differently. Akerman has said that she wanted "to simplify a reality to such a degree that on seeing Delphine Seyrig making coffee one sees all women making coffee."[43] Yet to describe Jeanne simply as a housewife who works as a prostitute in the afternoons is to perform the kind of reduction the film both provokes and refuses. Jeanne's repetitive routine reveals both the general category that she exemplifies (housewife/prostitute) and the singularities, the individual tics, that make her a unique individual. As such, she would seem to conform to Lukács's definition of type as a mesh of the "particular individual traits" of the character

and "the traits which are typical of the character as representatives of a class."[44] The peculiar interplay in *Jeanne Dielman* between the abstraction that arises from repetitions and their progressive accumulation as difference, however, generates a shift in the conception of type.

In their essay "Une Certaine Tendence du Cinema Français" (A certain tendency in French cinema, 1975), Serge Daney, Pascal Kane, J.-P. Oudart, and Serge Toubiana raise questions more relevant to our understanding of *Jeanne Dielman* than Lukács's analyses of nineteenth-century literature. Investigating the issue of cinematic naturalism, they are forced to consider the significance of type, stereotype, and the notion of representation in the political and nominal sense of the term. How is a character made to represent a group, a class, a certain minority? As Daney writes of the film *Dupont Lajoie,*

> The true "hero" of *Dupont Lajoie* is not an individual but a trio of middle-class French men. . . . The art of the film consists in not effacing the differences internal to the trio. These differences . . . can help to identify how, through a paradox that is not apparent, naturalism necessarily secretes its opposite: typage. . . . For a character in *Lajoie* to have a chance to acquire a certain exemplarity (to typify the Middle French racist . . . ) he has to take place between two poles . . . inherent to naturalist cinema: the stereotype and a certain *atypie*, the caricatural and the natural, in short Schumacher and the representative of the *bras Tornade*.[45]

Akerman aims for more than a negative attack on the representative type. Not only does her work negate the conventions of expressive realism, it renews the vocabulary of representativeness, exhausted by being caught midway between the allegorical and the typical, caricature and nature." She achieves this by shaping Jeanne as a peculiar exfoliation of the notion of example. Most narratives are based on the "rule of individuation" by which "in a bourgeois culture to tell a story means to speak about individuals, killers or martyrs, heroes or victims . . . while what is unthinkable are the collective agents, the grouped-me."[46] One appreciates Akerman's construction of type, then—her pressure on a single character to typify a group such as the class of housewives. One also appreciates how *Jeanne Dielman* integrates the "rule of individuation" with "statistics . . . the rule of the anonymous group."[47] Over a single character, Akerman accumulates a representation of both the individual and a collective entity, yielding an anti-essentialist image that corresponds neither to Jeanne Dielman nor to all housewives.[48]

The denial of Jeanne as a sociological essence is performed not at the expense of but through the bracketing of her background. Akerman provides contextual, narrative information not only through blocks of verbal address—the reading of letters, the neighbor's off-frame monologue—but through details, which give weight to her place and her presence. Furthermore, inverting the rule of individuation whereby anonymous actors strive to distinguish themselves as individuals, *Jeanne Dielman* uses Delphine Seyrig—a striking, well-known actress—in the role of an anonymous woman.[49]

Although exceptionally typical, Jeanne, as played by Seyrig, is above all exceptional. Akerman's statements indicate the complexity of her construction of type: "If I chose my mother," said Akerman, "it would only be my mother."[50] She develops this idea in another interview: "If I had chosen a nonprofessional actress for the role of Jeanne, she wouldn't be more than that single woman. Because she is an actress, she represents all other women."[51] Thus Akerman denies the naturalistic specificity that the use of an anonymous actor or actress would usually convey. Hers is a layered, defamiliarized specificity, a hyperrealist representation of type. She deliberately chose Seyrig "because she brought with her all the roles of mythical woman that she played until now. The woman in *Marienbad,* the woman in *India Song . . .* "[52] That another memory of Seyrig might confront Jeanne in people's minds interested Akerman. In using Seyrig's deeply resonant cinematic persona, she exposes her desire to subvert not only naturalism, with its categorical essences (The Mother, The Housewife), but also the realist notion of type (individual traits epitomizing some collective configuration). In fact, she channels Seyrig's public resonance through an extremely singular characterization.

Akerman avoids the idea of authenticity and of universal traits. She resolutely inscribes Seyrig, this subtly foreign body, within a perfectly unified background, and Seyrig's stylized performance, in tension with Akerman's detail-saturated realism, inflects this space with alienation. The linear narrative and Jeanne's visual integration with objects and spaces barely accommodate Seyrig's presence. At the same time, the overall consistency of the background is troubled by Akerman's hyperrealism, her hypertrophy of descriptive detail, and her use of Seyrig's persona—a detached, alien presence, neither here nor there. Seyrig's characterization of Jeanne includes recognizable behavior but is distilled through a pattern of stylization. The intense attention to details (formal and otherwise) superimposed on a culturally given narrative matrix (melodrama) corrodes naturalism from within.

Godard voids character affect both as an antinaturalist gesture and as a representation of alienation in capitalist society. But Jeanne's affectlessness is often taken, at least initially, as a personal difficulty in the character: her automatism and obsessive-compulsiveness border on pathology. By creating for her protagonist the precarious position of embodying both agency and automatism, Akerman manages to respond both to the cliché (Jeanne as feminist victim/heroine) and to its overthrow.

In *Two or Three Things,* a critique of capital and a semiological investigation converge in alienation. In *Jeanne Dielman,* the embrace of individual specificity and the representational hyperbole of a character's behavior (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. Clearly the pathology of Akerman's characters is a mimicked one. As in Bresson, a lack of psychological motivation translates into a nonnaturalistic performance; the character's performance is given an external motor, which resonates, however, with the energy and randomness of obsessive compulsion proper (see *Jeanne Dielman, Je tu il elle, Saute ma ville, Toute une nuit, J'ai faim j'ai froid*).

Clarifying the implications of Akerman's departures from conventional type, Amy Taubin indicts the singularity (the obsessive compulsion) portrayed in Jeanne because it hinders a generalization that might be productive:

> Are we to generalize from Jeanne to the oppression of many women through their subjugation to activity which offers them no range of creative choice? If so, Jeanne Dielman's pathology mitigates our willingness to generalize.[53]

The issue of typicality must matter deeply to a political movement such as feminism. Indeed, Akerman's characters often invite criticism along the lines of Taubin's intimation that were Jeanne less obsessive, she might be a better feminist heroine.

It is interesting to note how the sociological brand of feminism that would turn Jeanne into a typical housewife joins hands with formalist criticism;[54] their preference for the literal representation of the mundane, unmarred by the necessarily fictive murder scene (discussed in chapter 3), is an example. In "Death in Installments: *Jeanne Dielman,*" Jayne Loader criticizes this scene as unnecessarily compliant with sensationalist demands for a "bang-up ending" and attacks the idea of "offering individual solutions to complex social problems: kill criminals rather than abolish

the causes of crime, kill rapists rather than rearrange the sexual power structure that necessitates the act of rape."[55] In relation to the sex scenes, however, she believes that Akerman, by avoiding the presentation of such unique, "personal" acts as the act of sex, maintains an illusion of generality ("all men are identical"). Loader reproaches Akerman for following a model of realism, then betraying it. And in this respect, Loader points to the crux of Akerman's representational radicality: her simultaneously pared down and utterly complex notion of example.

Examples can be formed through an interplay of multiplicity and iteration—a single instance that stands for many similar cases. But examples can also be given by rarity if they imply "a system of values and expectations based on extratextual and textual ideas about frequency of occurrence and normal behavior."[56] At stake in Loader's complaint is the way Akerman frustrates, in an unsystematic way, all abstractive and normative operations related to exemplarity. On the one hand she negates the specificity of Jeanne's male clients so that they become putatively identical; on the other, Jeanne kills a specific, individualized man (rather than, in Loader's phrase, "the sexual structure that necessitates the exploitation of women"). Akerman plays with a notion of typicality that issues from recurrence (similar framing for similar situations). Alongside and in tension with this rhetorical, paradigmatic movement—the reprisal of similar events—she privileges gestures and images that denote particularities, setting up characterizations that are far from typical. Brenda Longfellow sums up this seeming paradox: "Is [Jeanne] a hysteric or a feminist revolutionary? Perhaps the only answer is both, and simultaneously."[57] The "closeness" of Akerman's characters to the abnormal makes them able both to assert the marginal and to elude marginality's attendant essentialism. For if the pathological is unco-optable as typical or representative, it is unco-optable as essence.

This, then, is one way one might read Akerman's radical *détournement* of the notion of type as an average representative. Although she has often said she wanted a distilled, "essential" housewife, her elaborate reductions and layerings produce a Jeanne Dielman who resists categorization. Akerman's strategies of defamiliarization and hyperbole lead her beyond the conundrum of specificity toward what might be termed an *exceptional typicality*.

The titles of Godard's and Akerman's films are as suggestive in their articulation of both the singular and the general as their protagonists are. The title *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* plays on the elasticity of the shifter "her" to accommodate substitution and paradigmatic associa-

tion, to welcome the "outside world." The title *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,* on the other hand, makes an absolute nominal and spatial claim that blocks the possibility of any shared reference. The feminist documentaries of the '70s sought to blend particularity and generality in a way that clearly shows in their titles' avoidance of surnames: *Joyce at 34, Janie's Janie* (1970–71). A generic title was congruent with a feminist agenda that privileged the shared anonymity of the militants. But the title *Jeanne Dielman* speaks of singularity.

Nonetheless its assertiveness also seems to invite the notion of exemplarity through the back door, as a supplement. Here, name and address do not represent some *pars pro toto;* they cling to the film's texture as dislocated appendices. The absolute particularity of its title colors the film in the same way that Seyrig does, oscillating between concreteness and abstraction. Title and persona unsettle notions of type and of representativeness while suggesting a perverse compliance with these very notions.

Displaying the resistant friction that characterizes the modernist refusal of essences, Jeanne can still be seen as a type, albeit in an unmapped, nonessentialist register. Akerman's main feat is her definition of a positive and political valence for singularity. With *Jeanne Dielman,* she gives direction to the liminality performed in *Je tu il elle.* Without superseding that work's unique mix of anonymity and eccentricity, *Jeanne Dielman* installs the notion of de-individualization at the heart of an ongoing politics—a feminism whose substance Akerman keenly redesigns.

## 6 FORMS OF ADDRESS

### Epistolary Performance, Monologue,

### and Bla, Bla, Bla

*There was this, and then this, and then this, and then this, nothing . . . one could truly lean on.*—Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*[1]

*Oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it.*—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari[2]

"If I make cinema, it is because of what I do not dare do in writing," says Akerman, in her video *Lettre de Cinéaste* (A filmmaker's letter, 1984). This supposed timidity cannot, of course, be taken at face value, for Akerman's writing is itself daring, sitting uneasily in a filmic narrative. Akerman's mise-en-scène alternately claims a direct discourse for her character and brackets his speech through blank delivery, long silences, and a skewed frontality. A deliberately awkward distribution of text disallows a comfortable fit between writing and speech, script and dialogue. Speech never entirely absorbs discourse; the sense of authorship never completely dissolves into a transparent third-person narrative. The writing itself straddles verisimilitude (as in the truck driver's monologue in *Je tu il elle*) and an off-center quality with overtones of the literary (as in the use of the French *passé simple* at one point in the voice-over early in the same film).

My concern in this chapter is to define the affinities among different modes of verbal address in *Jeanne Dielman, Meetings with Anna, News from Home,* and *Je tu il elle.* Letters, dramatic monologues, descriptions, storytelling—all these forms tend to imply a person who is absent, and all

can be associated with a temporal or spatial obstruction. The letter, for example, like the telephone conversation, signifies communication at a distance, communication hindered. And the monologue puts the burden of speech on one person for a long period of time, even though there may be an on-screen listener. Actually, a sense of impaired communication subtends verbal exchange in all Akerman's work.

### Epistolary Performance: *News from Home*

My interest here is in Akerman's writing, in the way her treatment of text perverts distinctions between discourse and story, meaning and affect, and, finally, in how she redefines expressivity not at the expense of redundant information but through it. My initial focus is the letter, a favorite Akerman form. Like other autobiographical texts, letters involve a continuous commerce between textual and extratextual data. The border between text and reality is figured, in the letter, as the real identities of writer and of addressee. Moreover, the letter's seemingly unproblematic transit between different orders of information and of verifiability creates the "effect of the real" mentioned by Barthes: unexpected shifts in address—direct and indirect speech, confessions and reports—result in a rhetoric of authentication. Letters stand midway between speech and writing, contact and distance. They design what desire—and, moreover, what desire for communication—can mean: the letter writer can only establish contact with the addressee through the dynamic of a fissured, forever faulty text.

It is precisely this "faulty" quality that is insisted upon in narrative-oriented films such as *Jeanne Dielman* and *Meetings with Anna* (which use letters rather less extensively than *News from Home* does). Here, dialogue is always out of scale with its context; the information it imparts is always at odds with the intimacy or distance it implies. There is always more or less said than the situation deserves.

Brenda Longfellow has described Akerman's cinema as an extended letter to her mother.[3] In one such "letter," *News from Home,* one finds themes that in significant ways underwrite the affect of all the verbal addresses in her work. *News from Home* is a singular example of the skewed self-presentation. The backbone of its soundtrack is found material, a series of letters to Akerman from her mother; the way Akerman makes this writing her own—listening to it, loving it, overriding it—may stand as the model for verbal communication in her films.

Akerman's verbal exchanges tread a fine line between warranting attention and, given their redundance, deserving neglect. One is made to hear

and take into account what is said, even as the writing lapses into concrete and redundant matter. The contest between releasing meaning and overpowering it is nowhere more poignant than in *News from Home.* The film, made on Akerman's return to New York from Europe in 1976, comprises a series of long fixed-camera takes of Manhattan streets and subway cars, intercut with a few pans and two long tracking shots near the end. The structure is serial, additive—there is no buildup of dramatic tension or telos. Orchestrating the litanylike quality of the film is Akerman's use of sound, and especially of voice-over narration. As she reads aloud letters her mother sent her during her first stay in the city, in 1972, these documents rebound several times from the original time and space of their writing: first as Akerman reads them, again as they are performed for the film (1976), and again each time the film is projected. Reports from Belgium—mundane bits and pieces, family gossip, the mother's moods—are relentlessly revoiced at the site and time of reading, mapping a restricted personal history. Thus the letter collapses the dual temporality of autobiographical writing—a necessarily belated report on one's experience of an earlier moment.

It is a twisted filial echo that voices the mother's plaintive words. "My darling," Akerman reads in a heavy French accent, "hugs and kisses from your mother who loves you." Or, "I live to the rhythm of your letters." Speaking her mother's voice, Akerman creates a strange superimposition of roles, unbalancing the fiction of autobiography. She ventriloquizes her mother: "You always write the same thing and I have the impression you don't say anything." To voice her mother's complaint becomes her response to the complaint—her mother's writing becomes hers, and with a vengeance. Yet this writing is less an answer to her mother than its voided echo.

The significance of the twist is clear. The voice issues from and is directed at the same place; it echoes from a paradoxical space, both source and end, short-circuiting communication. The pronominal shifters "I" and "you" ordinarily signal one subject in relation to another, but here these carriers of subjectivity are shown as precariously rooted. *News from Home* questions the notion of presence, of an evident, unified source for an utterance, at the very moment at which difference and distance seem abolished: the moment of voicing. Addresser and addressee are collapsed, disavowing an essential identity for either. In phasing in and out from the locus of writing (a Europe of named individuals and family relations) to that of listening and performing (a New York of now crowded, now solitary anonymity), Akerman complicates the voice-over's disjunctiveness.

The sound that accompanies her shots of subway doors and passing trucks and cars seems referential, but is out of sync with them. This "noise" interferes seemingly randomly with one's ability to hear the letters, momentarily shifting one's interest to the space in which Akerman supposedly reads. Random weaving of attention through words (letters), referential sound, and images—a common tactic in structural minimalist film—bolsters Akerman's subversion of a fixed locus for the "I." The alienation between image and sound parallels the disjunction between the mother's space of letter writing and Akerman's space of performance—between the foreign reality and New York. Intermittently muffled by the sound of the city, the intimacy and warmth of the text claim closeness but spell distance. It is precisely this distance that is worked out in Akerman's reading.

A question intrudes: how is one to think of displacement (the stated theme of *News from Home*) or even of difference itself (between Europe and the United States, mother and daughter, Yiddish and French,[4] French and English, speech and writing) when difference is phased out, compressed, in the reading of the letters? For in reading them, in fact in translating them into English, Akerman is appropriating and "signing" her mother's writing, confirming the process through which the experiential becomes public—what Jacques Derrida has called the "otobiography."[5] Derrida points out that the signature takes place on the addressee's side; "It is the ear of the other who signs," he says, referring to the structure of textuality in general.[6] Besides, "this testamentary structure doesn't befall a text as if by accident but constructs it. This is how a text always comes about."[7]

Furthermore, *News from Home* strips the letter of its materiality. I don't mean just that there is no body to anchor it on—no images of, say, hand, paper, pen, typing. Nor do I refer to the equally absent body from which the voice issues. A more radical process than a play of absence and presence (as, for instance, in Marguerite Duras's oeuvre) is at stake here. For Akerman to give voice to her mother's letter raises ambivalent issues of inheritance and of indebtedness: in order to sign them, she must appropriate them, betray them. The original signature is erased, as if, through repetition, one could bypass repetition. Akerman's voice silences her mother's in a simulacrum of communication.

The appropriation of voice in *News from Home* thematizes the secondary inscription present in all representation—the script. Under the psychological guise of a daughter's resistance to her mother, it also thematizes the demise of origins theorized by Derrida, for the voice always doubles what is intrinsically double.[8] Akerman's narrative brings the citational quality

of utterance to a limit: instead of confirming meaning, repetition stops making sense. It is symptomatic of her work to disturb questions of origin and authorship through a mutual contamination of writing and performance. The text has a writerly quality that disavows it as natural speech, while the rhythm of the delivery suggests a materiality that qualifies its content.

When asked about the monologuelike quality of her dialogue, Akerman allows, "What interests me in dialogue is that it rounds up with a rhythm . . . a psalmody where the meaning of phrases does not make sense."[9] This interest in the text as rhythm, as concrete materiality, brings forth its aspect of *écriture*. Akerman cites Delphine Seyrig's reading of the letter from Jeanne's sister in *Jeanne Dielman* as the single case when an actress performed her text with the rhythmic quality she sought.[10] Seyrig's affectless reading of the letter encapsulates Akerman's concept of text and writing as existing solely in repetition. Up to that point, we barely know anything about Jeanne; the letter is the first in a series of informational bits of text spread through the film. Yet Seyrig delivers it in a monotone, sabotaging logic and grammar by forcing a rhythm on the words, as if they were a musical score. In anchoring this delivery to the act of doubling that any reading constitutes, Akerman signals, justifiably in terms of the narrative (and the character's weary stance), the repeatable character of discourse.

This rhythmic quality is most apparent when the performance—that is, the voicing of the script—is conceived and staged as a reading. In this case, for example, letter and screenplay are momentarily collapsed as the pretext for a monotone performance, much in the way one hears scripts read mechanically at rehearsals (an alienation technique suggested by Brecht). In *Jeanne Dielman* as in *News from Home*, it is in the act of reading that Akerman's characters best achieve the chantlike quality she desires.

*Jeanne Dielman* exemplifies Akerman's treatment of text. Its extended monologues, both in and out of the frame, share a quality with Seyrig's reading of the letter: a chantlike delivery transforms compacted, excessive information into rhythm, as voice-over description does in *Je tu il elle* and *News from Home*. Given the frequent silences of *Jeanne Dielman*, the excess of text in certain exchanges becomes all the more marked. The strategy of extended monologues maintains the basic division of labor suggested by a letter or a phone call: possible answers are already included in the text. *Jeanne Dielman* also transforms the back-and-forth of conventional dialogue into spaced, delayed exchanges—almost a discontinuous sequence of monologues. As in *Meetings with Anna*, Akerman's dialogues affect the timing of the action-reaction trope. Here, monologuelike speech

is the aural complement of the extended takes and the avoidance of reverse shots, which similarly transfer a response onto the audience.

*Jeanne Dielman*'s spasmodic distribution of sound and silence evokes the alienation between the characters. As Jeanne and Sylvain eat soup, for example, their spoons ring against the plates in an orchestrated disjunction; and this slight asynchronism, a departure from the back-and-forth conventions of naturalism, is repeated in the imbalance of their long monologues, which contrast with the monosyllabic replies of the character listening. Again, Akerman rejects the use of extradiegetic music. Thus all the sound in her films—a concrete score of amplified diegetic sound—is both content and matter, meaning and noise. "Noise" is understood here both in the context of information theory, where it connotes an excess of "chaotic" information that hinders signification, and in that of concrete music, as an expressive sonic element.

The aphasic alternation of silence and monotone talk in *Jeanne Dielman* exemplifies how Akerman approaches the text as expressive sound while simultaneously using it to advance the narrative. She doesn't exactly refuse to "telegraph" narrative information; rather, hyperbolizing this conventional storytelling device through impacted, sealed-off blocks of verbiage, she problematizes communication. It is less the verbal addresses themselves than their distribution—density followed by rarefaction—that jars. The usual formats of human exchange, the prescribed temporal alternations of dialogue, are pumped out of their binding element—naturalness—to create a gradual but unequivocal acknowledgment that words, as soon as they are spoken, are void. This knowledge is sensed by both speaker and listener, including the viewer of the film.

Akerman's bracketed speech engages one only at the expense of her characters' motives and reactions. It makes one acutely aware of language (whether written or spoken) as material, and only secondarily as meaning. Meaning is entirely qualified by the rhythm and form of delivery. The expression and rhythm of the mother's letters as read in *News from Home,* or of the neighbor's litany by the door in *Jeanne Dielman,* empty words of their representational value. These verbal addresses claim their power in the tension between an excess of narrative clues—Jeanne's past, the neighbor's daily routine, both described off-frame—and the inability of these plot data to affect the narrative.

### Talk-Blocks: *Meetings with Anna*

Akerman's monologues can be considered signs of hindered communication, sound masses that rhythmically break the silence but are sealed off

from functioning as actual conversational exchange. In *Meetings with Anna,* every character Anna (Aurore Clément) comes across delivers a monologue, placing Anna as a relay for the spectator—her distracted absorption in the other characters operates as a surrogate for our own. Each of the blocks of discourse triggered by Anna's passage entails a location, a character, a story. The film sets an *Au hasard Balthasar* effect. À la Bresson, emotions and long-unsaid truths are catalyzed not so much by what is said as by an emoted presence. The result is a certain cinematic intensification, where tone and rhythm constitute a "bla, bla, bla" that foregrounds expressivity at the expense of "making sense."[11]

Accents and peculiar rhythms are added obstructions to transparency of meaning: Sylvain reads Baudelaire with a Flemish accent; Jeanne gives a flattened reading of her sister's letter; Akerman reads her mother's letters in her own accented English in *News from Home;* and in *Meetings with Anna,* Heinrich (Helmut Griem), the train passenger (Hanns Zieschler), and Anna's mother (Lea Massari) all speak French with tonal variations that jam the flow of meaning.

*Meetings with Anna* is instructive regarding Akerman's simultaneous complicity with and perversion of naturalistic representation. Entirely bypassing her characters' interiority, she shuns any elliptical utterances that might suggest some hidden or repressed meaning. The clarity of her character's exposition is so extreme, and yet so rhythmically distorted, that one is slightly alienated from what is heard.

The mise-en-scène too undermines familiar conventions. It may be clear that Anna is a stand-in for the audience, but the status of her attention is ambivalent: as she listens to other characters talk, her stance wavers between concern and distant politeness in such a way that it is hard to tell the difference. Akerman consistently characterizes Anna as polite, but her behavior may paste over a more nuanced feeling that is, to say the least, equivocal. At times, the characters' skewed frontality in relation to the camera suggests distance. At other times the characters face each other, but their bodies are symmetrically posed in the frame, and they are totally or slightly turned to the front.[12] Whatever their focus of attention within the film, then, they create a strong sense of a third, crucial axis—that of the camera.

The characters in *Meetings with Anna* touch, but barely. These self-absorbed presences make fleeting contact at best. That Anna comes into the lives of the other characters is perhaps less telling than the brevity of her contact with them, and the vague attentiveness with which she listens to them. The performer's opacity derives from neither a momentary involvement with inner thoughts nor the distraction of external events. Her

Exchange of monologues, Aurore Clément and Hanns Zieschler in *Meetings with Anna* (1978). Still, courtesy of the Collection of the Cinématèque Québecoise.

disengagement delineates a character intrinsically split. Anna's politeness is not to be understood through a psychological grid; her semiabsorption and inattention establish the film's sole channel of complicity with the audience. Meeting no response within the film itself, the characters' utterances broadcast their double-voiced nature.

Two related strategies enhance this sense: the lack of voice-overs and the use of monologues. It is the absence of voice-overs in *Meetings with Anna* that marks the film's unusual representation of subjectivity. No alternative consciousness hovers verbally in an off-screen space, as, for instance, in Godard. Akerman's fixed, symmetrical framing and long shot duration clear the scene, and magnify the focus on single characters as they speak. Along with the fixed perspective, there are no reverse or point-of-view shots; the characters are always seen from the outside. This minimalist approach enhances the literary quality of Akerman's texts. Such detours as these are fundamental to her creation of an impure modern cinema.

In this respect, the analogy between the monologuelike dialogue of Akerman's films and the literary or theatrical dramatic monologue is telling. For the dramatic monologue constructs an unstable voice, suggesting two, superimposed perspectives—that of the character and that of the author. Akerman's work may contain no monologues in the strict sense, but the

length that many of her verbal addresses run without conversational retort creates a similar instability. Distinguishing between the soliloquy and the dramatic monologue, Robert Langbaum explains that while the soliloquist offers self-analysis and internal debate, the speaker of the dramatic monologue is absorbed in a "particular perspective that makes his self-revelation incidental to his purpose."[13] Akerman's dialogue-qua-monologue lacks both the internalized perspective of the soliloquy (exemplified in Godard's digressions) and the externalized counterperspective of normal dialogue.[14] Deprived of recourse to an alternate perspective within the diegesis, Akerman's dialogue-as-monologue structure displaces response onto the audience. With no reversal of perspective, she establishes a noncomplicit relation with her audience.

For Langbaum, loading the burden of the text onto a single character often imposes a sense of fanaticism on that character's vision. He sees the dramatic monologue as an excess in relation to the plot: "The motive for speaking is inadequate to the utterance. . . . the utterance is in other words largely gratuitous—it need never have occurred."[15] Discussing Robert Browning's *St. Simeon*, Langbaum remarks, "We need also a term out of abnormal psychology."[16] In both the dramatic monologue and Akerman's dialogue-as-monologue, the meaning of the text is "in disequilibrium with what the speaker reveals and understands." This disequilibrium and the effects of an excessive focus on a single perspective deserve further discussion in Akerman's case, for they may explain the constant feeling one has of some slight psychological disturbance in her characters. In literature, the dramatic monologue exposes the shakiness of naturalistic dialogue. In Akerman's films, the dialogue-as-monologue submits this instability, actually present in any text, as a boundary of naturalist cinema.

Akerman provides her monologuelike dialogue with a certain ambivalence. On the one hand it seems antipsychological. The litanylike quality of the voices in *News from Home* and *Je tu il elle,* and even of the monologues in *Jeanne Dielman,* has an entrancing effect; rhythm cumulatively sabotages attention to meaning. On the other hand, the characters' insistence on long speeches intimates a meaning to be decoded. Even when an Akerman film advances more rhythmically than dramatically, there is a marked pressure for signification. The characters' continuous flirtation with pathology is part of this pressure for meaning; I address it in some detail in my analyses of *Je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman.*

Akerman does not disarticulate meaning absolutely. The tension she establishes between form and content varies markedly in its orchestration. The monologues in *Jeanne Dielman* may impart quite prosaic information

(for example, Jeanne's long conversation with a woman as she tries to buy a button for Sylvain's coat), but their extensiveness takes on abstract and expressive values of its own, progressively detaching them from their putative content. Conversely, the progressions of the monologues invoke a growing uneasiness in the listener, whether character or spectator; they tend to move from polite, conventional exchanges into personal revelations that are clearly out of place. As Jeanne rambles about her son's coat, for example—how it came from Canada—she moves on to describing how her sister, on her last visit to Brussels, slept in the living room while Sylvain shared the bedroom with Jeanne and her husband.

This inappropriate revelation matches Jeanne's reading of her sister's letter. Connected thematically (both Sylvain's coat and the letter come from the sister in Canada), the two scenes complement each other, exemplifying two reverse strategies at work in Akerman's use of speech. As she reads the letter, Seyrig reduces all its content to the same level, disarticulating logic and grammar through a flat, monotone delivery. In the scene at the button store, on the other hand, the babble of banality is permeated with anxiety. The accumulating "insignificant" details force meaning—the fact that Jeanne can't find the right button, the fact that last time her sister visited, Sylvain slept in the same room with herself and her husband, the fact that . . . the fact that all of these facts matter.

The question remains of what to make of the content of Akerman's texts, bracketed as it may be in long monologues. Though partially reduced to form and rhythm, a residue of content eventually resurfaces, for Akerman exploits language fully; the writing in her work always carries weight. It is impossible to void meaning completely in these films. There is a parallel here with Akerman's visual oscillation between literalness and referentiality: sound and language are submitted to the same strategies of apparently senseless accumulation present in the serial structure of *Jeanne Dielman*. *Jeanne Dielman*'s monologues have an asymbolic concreteness that resembles the literalness of Jeanne's silent performance, the major difference being that it is harder to dodge the symbolic reference present in verbal language. The transgressive meaning of Akerman's accumulative minimalism is made clear in *Je tu il elle* when, over shots of Julie (Akerman) writing to her lover, we hear, "I wrote him three pages," and later, "Then I wrote him six pages to say the same thing again." Quantity—of shots, eaten sugar, written pages—is cleaved from significance.

Akerman's resistance to signification emerges in writing that lends rhythm and concreteness to banality while corroding meaning through repetition. The sense of repetition is not an effect solely of the recitational

tone in which these stories are delivered, for their nature as repeats is textually acknowledged. Like the images, the writing is pervaded with clichés, platitudes, much-too-well-known stories. Besides, one's sense of hearing commonplaces intensifies the feeling of the litany. Verbal discourse is constantly drained of any original motivation, always spoken as a retelling.

The idea of prescripted, unchanging stories is often acknowledged verbally: "I ask you again . . . for the last time, marry my son," says Ida to Anna, clearly restating an oft-voiced demand. In *News from Home,* each letter read either rephrases or literally repeats a certain set of remarks, interspersing them with family gossip: "My dearest little girl . . . ," "You don't say if you're coming back . . . ," "I only want your happiness . . . ," "I was getting worried over not getting any news." In *Jeanne Dielman,* Jeanne wearily retells her son the story of how she met his father. This is obviously a bedtime favorite. And in *Meetings with Anna,* when Anna meets a man on a train, he parades a series of platitudes about Belgium ("They say it is a country of plenty"), France ("They say it is the country of freedom"), and South America (the climate "is hot and humid"). From time to time, Anna answers with a sort of verbal amen: "So they say" (On le dit).

The sense of repetition varies with the text, the mise-en-scène, and the performance. Here one notes the brilliance of Akerman's writing, for it is often the text itself that subtly dislocates expected patterns of exchange. In *Meetings with Anna,* for example, Anna listens to the monologue of a German teacher, Heinrich. At first it seems a series of oversimplified tales, but Heinrich's account of his life—his comfortable, passive relationship with his wife, his wife's relationship with the dark Turk with whom she has eloped, the pleasure he used to take in singing *Don Giovanni* with his friend Hans—gradually slides into a summary list of events in German history. The connecting phrase "and then" (et puis) makes up the bulk of this list: "In the '20s there were the communists . . . and then in '33 . . . the war . . . the peace . . . the reconstruction." "And then," he says, "one day my friend lost his job and I lost my friend, such a nice man. What have they done to my country?"

Rather than conveying any real information, these fragments of German history work as common verities. They are well-known markers of crisis, high points in a generic knowledge of European history shared not only by Heinrich and Anna but by a whole post-Holocaust consciousness. Told this way, national history releases not meaning but the affect or emotional tone of a bedside story. Heinrich's monologue equates an unasked-for and

hence all-the-more-urgent revelation of his private life with a reduction of national history to bookish milestones. The first part of his account is needed (the viewer wants some background for this character), the second is superfluous. The poignancy of the speech lies in its reduction of text to tale. In equating real news with generic data, Akerman finds and releases an intensity in redundant information.

Another activation of the cliché appears in Sylvain's queries about sex in *Jeanne Dielman.* Describing to his mother a talk with a friend, he re-states the terms of the Oedipus complex. As with Heinrich's narrative, this reprisal of a familiar story intimates a combined resistance to and re-generation of content. Akerman's versions of history and of the story of Oedipus profit from the intensity of the cliché—the fact that the story is still told, despite being well known. Her refiguring of these clichés also injects into them an estrangement that prevents them from passing as platitudes. In Heinrich's case, a drastically reduced informational sub-stratum activates a moral out of a few well-chosen items; in Sylvain's, the extremity of invoking sword and fire to describe lovemaking suggests a pervasive anxiety about sex, and exposes the sexual repression operative in Jeanne's household.

One effect of Akerman's use of redundancy is an infantilization of lis-tener and speaker. Lacking conventional narrative purpose, Akerman's disconnected, prolix verbal addresses are easily read as signs of some psychological disability. In *Jeanne Dielman* the part of Sylvain, an adoles-cent who regressively needs to be told a bedtime story, is played by an adult, Jan Decorte. In *Meetings with Anna,* the defamiliarization starts with Anna's question at a hotel front desk: when the receptionist tells her that her mother has called, she responds, "How does she know I'm here?" It is only with his reply, "I'm sorry . . . I don't know," that one recognizes the question's incongruity.

Anna's lack of understanding of the amount of information appropriate in different social contexts is one example of how Akerman introduces excess content. Anna will ask the receptionist to place a call to Cologne, then add, "They've only just moved, but they have a phone already, any-way I don't know if they are there at this time." The physical presence of the listener makes little difference to what is said; telephone conversa-tions in the privacy of the hotel room are equated with the direct address of the clerk at the front desk. The emphatic expletives usually present in Anna's phone conversations may be followed by more substantive remarks—"Ah! . . . it is the director of the Roxy, he awaits me with another gentleman"—but these remarks, by transgressing the conventions of natu-ralistic representation, suggest a slightly weird, moronic character.

In one of these phone conversations, Anna calls the receptionist, who is supposed to connect her to Italy in two hours' time. Without pausing between phrases she says,

> Allo, I know it is not two hours yet. I found a tie, a pearl-gray silk tie. I am certain it is silk. Besides, I've read the label. It is on the second hanger on the left side of the closet; I left it there, I believe it belongs to the man who was here before me, maybe the one sitting with a beer in the hall. He had a small suitcase. I didn't notice if he wears a tie. . . . Ah it is not his, ah I thought so. I will leave it there. You will call me in two hours, a little less now.

Almost parodically, Akerman illustrates the sort of narrative imagination that supposedly characterizes the filmmaker or storyteller, linking two disconnected episodes—the tie she finds in the closet and the man we see in the background as she registers in the hotel. This speech exposes the underlying thrust of Akerman's writing: she gives Anna, the filmmaker, an imagination that in narrative terms is perfectly banal. Yet by externalizing this imaginary link in a completely unnecessary phone call, Akerman short-circuits conventional narrative. Anna's motives for speech are inadequate and the speech itself clearly gratuitous. In spouting narrative clichés, expanding or compressing them and, mostly, saying them unwarrantedly, Akerman, as Anna, sings out of tune. And it is such slight but definite dislocation, the misplaced tone and accent of her writing, that wrings music from her text.

### Postscript: *The Man with the Suitcase* and *A Filmmaker's Letter*

*Meetings with Anna* ends with the only form of verbal address otherwise absent from the film: the voice-off. Lying on her bed, Anna plays her answering machine. After each disembodied message we hear three short beeps; then, in the second-to-last message, a voice says, in an Italian accent, "Anna, dove sta, Anna, where are you?" The message stresses the question of Anna's whereabouts; and her absence from any one place, her wandering, is a direct function of her identity as a filmmaker. The Italian voice also gives provisional closure to Anna's distracted stance throughout the film: she has been bothered by continually missing a connection with her lover in Italy.

Another emphasis however, on "you" as opposed to "where," suggests a different set of questions, which cohere around the issue of presence. Akerman herself has advanced this interpretation in an interview; instead

of defining Anna in the negative—as a presence lacking place, as absence—
she has defended Anna's presence as is. Anna's mobility has been com-
pared to that of other road-movie wanderers, but Akerman is adamant on
her difference from say, Wim Wenders's characters in *Kings of the Road* or
*Alice in the Cities:* "Anna's trip through Northern Europe is not a roman-
tic, initiation voyage."[17] She is not looking for identity. Rather, her mobil-
ity designates her as a "mutant being," a woman who truly rules out the
values of domesticity. Thus her wandering is misleading if read as the sign
of an identity problem that would be solved if she stayed home. "It is her
work that makes her travel, but one could almost say of Anna that she has
the vocation for exile."[18]

In a quiet way, *Meetings with Anna* plays out the liminal position Aker-
man herself holds in *Je tu il elle*, where she shifts among the roles of
character, author, and director. Akerman's attempt to update the radical
liminality of the earlier film can be seen in the suggestion of Anna as
"mutant." The themes of travel and nomadism present in both films are in
certain ways circumstantial; what matters is that the characters' border-
line behavior is grafted over Akerman's presence or persona. It is Aker-
man's figuration of her own self that interests us here.

Authorial traces of Akerman in her films include the low camera posi-
tion in *Jeanne Dielman*, which corresponds to Akerman's own sight line,
and the reading of letters in *News from Home*, which collapses addresser
and addressee; both *Meeting with Anna* and *The Man with the Suitcase*
(1983) set up parallels between character and director, and Akerman her-
self is physically present in *Saute ma ville*, *Je tu il elle*, *The Eighties*, and
in her work for TV—*The Man with the Suitcase*, *Family Business: Chan-
tal Akerman Speaks about Film* (1984), *A Filmmaker's Letter*, and *Sloth*
(1986).

The variations in meaning of these films are self-evident. I restrict my
analysis to works in which Akerman's physical or referential presence
questions the fiction of an univocal, fixed identity. In *Je tu il elle* and
*Meetings with Anna*, for example, the major issue underlying the represen-
tation of a "je," or of "a filmmaker" loosely based on Akerman herself, is
how to author a self that is not necessarily oneself.

Akerman claims that she appeared in *Je tu il elle* simply because she
couldn't stand the way someone else acted the "je." She wanted a rougher
delivery in that role. This assertion and her brilliant performance high-
light her peculiar relation to autobiography: Akerman uses her own body
to undermine the authority of origin and referent. When, however, Aker-
man asks Clément to play a role modeled on her, one can infer she has

found a means of transferring the internal disjunction constitutive of the pronominal shifter *je* onto another body. The sense of the phrase "je est un autre" varies in Akerman's different uses of another performer to represent herself. The use of Clément to thematize "Chantal Akerman" is instructive in relation to Akerman's presence in other works; at stake in how the filmmaker represents herself is the broader matter of the attempt to create a distinct, separate object to replace one in one's discourse. Representing oneself demands complex operations of objectification to create a fictional entity that is clearly separate from, yet refers to, the enunciating self.

Watching *Meetings with Anna,* one is struck by the resemblances between Anna and "Chantal Akerman" (going on what one knows of Akerman from outside the film). Yet the film's reflexivity is only partly based on its borrowings from Akerman's history. In my discussion of *Meetings with Anna,* I suggested that the film's formal effects of alienation and distanciation become a sort of secondary theme within the film's diegesis—that Anna, modeled, significantly, on a filmmaker like Akerman, bears the weight of a representation split between scene and audience. *Meetings with Anna* saturates its characters with conflicting demands—of silence and speech, of absorption with oneself and with an elsewhere. Akerman voids her representation of her self by superimposing divergent energies on it. The character of Anna adds to one's understanding of the filmmaker Akerman, but one's understanding of Akerman doesn't illuminate Anna. A complex deferral in identity construction cancels the analogy between Anna and Akerman as an explanatory principle of the work.

*Meetings with Anna* was followed by two works that examine the filmmaker's chores in different ways: *The Man with the Suitcase* and *A Filmmaker's Letter.* Akerman begins *The Man with the Suitcase* at the point where *Meetings with Anna* ends: the moment when "the filmmaker" reenters her apartment after an absence. In the later film an active, plump, fast-paced Akerman replaces the ethereal, opaque Clément of *Meetings with Anna.* In *A Filmmaker's Letter,* a ten-minute video made for *Antenne 2,* the French television network, to present Akerman to a larger public, Akerman appears *with* Clément, her scenic alter ego.

Making a filmmaker's life their subject, both film and video return to the idea of what it means to thematize the self, this time emphasizing the way Akerman's presence either prevents or assists the transformation of the self into a fixed entity. Akerman's body stands in the way in these works: introducing herself, she puts herself at odds with the demand for a separate, fictional self. To make Akerman the theme clearly becomes problematic.

The aural contrast between *Meetings with Anna* and *The Man with the*

*Suitcase* is striking. In place of Akerman's long monologues, the later film is almost without speech, instead using intertitles, an initial voice-over, and the conventions of silent comedy—exaggerated representations of silence (tiptoeing) or of loud noises (chance collisions), contrasts between the actors' scales (tall and short, etc.), and so on. Off-screen sound is inordinately important in this depiction of a paranoid sensibility: we start trying to decode the sound of footsteps, typing, or a key turning. Taking to an extreme the animosity underlying Anna's relation to men in *Meetings with Anna, The Man with the Suitcase* evokes the contours and formal strategies of both Laurel and Hardy shticks and Bresson's *A Man Escaped.*

At the beginning of the film, Akerman gets home after a trip. We see her pleasure in surveying her territory as she gets ready to work. But when she comes back from buying paper and turns the key in the lock, someone inside opens the door; a very tall man and a very short Akerman clumsily cross paths. The man is a visitor, supposed to have left already. He announces that he's staying a while longer. Without a word, Akerman dismantles her worktable. Refusing any help, she furiously moves her things—the table, a typewriter—to her own room. From then on, everything she does relates to that other space, the living room, from which she has exiled herself. More: her work is transformed into controlling the time and space occupied by the presence she abhors. Her strategies to avoid her male visitor's presence go to hilarious extremes, especially since she never explains why she's angry, indeed barely answers his questions. At the same time, she's entirely obsessed with him. Her own routine as a writer and filmmaker is replaced by elaborate schedules for showering, breakfasting, and coming and going. She starts to sneak into her own apartment.

The issues here, as in *Meetings with Anna,* are those of nomadism and celibacy. Discussing Franz Kafka, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explore nomadism in terms of a complex articulation of relations to food and to writing. By this scheme, food is linked to a fixed place, that of planting and harvest, and territorialization connotes an attachment to family and to conservative values. Conversely, writing—the use of language, and the creative act—results in exile, a deterritorialization from social conventions (though not all writing is necessarily deterritorialized). Exile and nomadism, then, have a progressive thrust—they reject the values of domesticity. In asserting her Jewishness and transnationalism, Akerman valorizes nomadism as posited by Deleuze and Guattari.

Traveling can occur in a single place—in "one's bedroom," say—and be all the more intense for that. As Kafka writes in his diaries, "Now you lie against this, now against that wall, so that the window keeps moving

around you. . . . I must take my walks and that must be sufficient but in compensation there is no place in all the world where I could not take my walks."[19] I will not develop the analogy between Kafka's descriptions and Akerman's minimalism in detail; the notion of exile (from social norm, from fixed gender roles), however, is cogent for her films. *Je tu il elle,* for example, starts off in a "room" like Kafka's, and in *Meetings with Anna,* the political dimension of the central "mutant being," who is also an artist, is characterized by constant nomadism.

In *The Man with the Suitcase,* a radical aversion to a man's presence, as well as to the image of coupled domesticity, becomes a form of exile. Wandering is spatially limited here, yet the apartment setting seems to accelerate Akerman's obsessional tics so that they replicate, in a comic register, the ideas that inform her films in general. After refusing her guest's offer of ratatouille, Akerman sneaks into the kitchen to eat voraciously. She speaks her mind—she wants him out—only when he's shaving in the bathroom, where he can't hear her. In an epigrammatic, gendered representation of nomadism, Akerman carries a tray (a suitcase of sorts), holding food and a clock around the apartment. Thus she thematizes her own exile as well as her own oeuvre (duration and cooking being a summary image of *Jeanne Dielman*). As the woman with the tray maps a course through the remainder of a man's space, her nomadic withdrawal defines something particular to Akerman's filmmaking rhythm: the fissuring of an ideal and unified notion of the self through her own, awkward, body.

*The Man with the Suitcase* describes a paradoxical domestic entrapment. At the same time, Akerman explicitly and ironically acknowledges the discursive instance. At the high point of her exile in her room, Akerman develops a system of visual control: through a video monitor, she follows the path of the man who has invaded her space—or, rather, doesn't so much follow him as point him out to us. This figuration of authorial control is, of course, a condensed image of the entire film. The splitting of a character between being cornered and taking control suggests how Akerman uses her body to extend the parameters of creativity implicit in the fact that she is, after all, making the film.

More pointedly, the theme of the retreat into one's apartment and then into one's own room, and into a situation where all that matters is the control of another person's presence, comments interestingly on the notion of self-reflexiveness in cinema. What remains of the character "Akerman" when her space is stolen? The control that comes when Akerman plays herself as a filmmaker—one recognizes bits of *The Eighties* (1983) playing in the video monitor, and later she demonstrates her proficiency

with a video camera—is offset by a fiction of insecurity. As the self aspires to a greater, if more fragile, definition, it is circumscribed by a fear of invasion. The fiction of self at stake here is in exile from its defining trait: the role of writer and filmmaker. (In *Meetings with Anna,* too, one sees only slight traces of Anna's profession.) However, I would claim that this retreat and self-exile take the theme of nomadism to its limit: in stripping the character of her professional makeup, Akerman leaves her with no option but to create, using her own body to partition time and space.

The corporeality of the bodies, their contrast with each other, and the delay in self-expression suggest the affinity between *The Man with the Suitcase* and *Je tu il elle.* Again, Akerman's presence in a reduced setting formally replicates a liminal condition. As in *Je tu il elle,* a character is temporarily stripped of social identity and renews the terms of that identity. The resulting condition of liminal subjectivity is experienced through a performer's rhythm. Akerman has said that she breaks down her own structural mastery as a filmmaker by the use of different acting styles and personas. These different rhythms (including her own as a performer) counterpoint her dry, minimalist sobriety. One could say, then, that the creation of an obsessional system of control (following the man in the apartment, say) is both diegetically and formally related to the definition of a character's or actor's timing and rhythm.

*The Man with the Suitcase* shows Akerman involved in something like a process of production, a situation that might precede the "actual" writing and shooting that we see the character getting ready to do. Between two scripts—one featuring conventional images of the filmmaker-author, the other a paranoid mapping of a foreign body that interrupts authorship— Akerman writes the film we watch. This convoluted representation of authorship borrows from silent comedy's emphasis on physical expressivity, trading the explanatory power of language for the preverbal tantrum: a preauthorship fear that demands only Akerman's physical presence. Both the theme of entrapment in *The Man with the Suitcase* and the film's use of sound are intrinsically connected to this notion of a self in retreat, a representation of liminality that relies on silence and choreography.

### What is Wrong with Signing? *A Filmmaker's Letter*

*The Man with the Suitcase* and *A Filmmaker's Letter* are postscripts to the extended letter that Akerman's films constitute. In a lighter vein, they thematize the proposals of *Meetings with Anna* and *News from Home.* They do not replace or summarize Akerman's other work; like any supple-

ment, in fact, they beg for more. Written after the letter has been signed, they are afterthoughts, efforts to correct what seems amiss in the rest of the text. The correction is, I should warn, qualified; neither work really amends the image of the self presented in the earlier films. If *The Man with the Suitcase* purports to be a humorous segue from *Meetings with Anna,* its version of nomadism is actually more stringent than Anna's wanderings; Akerman's presence in it, with its pseudodirect presentation of "Akerman the filmmaker," only amplifies the split quality of Akerman's mise-en-scène and of Clément's performance in *Meetings with Anna.* Both the serious and the comic films mock the possibility of grafting a fixed identity into a film, whether through Clément's presence or through Akerman's own. Rather, the thematics of exile provide a clue to a basic direction of Akerman's work—away from a fixed image of the self.

*A Filmmaker's Letter,* on the other hand, tries to do what Akerman's work otherwise consistently avoids: to construct an image for Akerman the filmmaker, as signature and as body. In *News from Home,* Akerman cancels the authority of origins by reproducing—"betraying"—her mother's words. At the end of *A Filmmaker's Letter,* on the other hand, she heralds betrayal as homage: "A letter must be signed; what should I write, 'Chantal,' 'Chantal Akerman,' or simply 'Akerman'? My father wanted a son. So let's sign 'Akerman' to give him pleasure." The major question of the video, though, is that of to whom this pleasure is directed.

Produced by *Antenne 2* and aimed at a limited but still anonymous TV audience, *A Filmmaker's Letter* lacks a specific addressee. And the image that the filmmaker constructs of herself is interestingly inflected by the indistinctness and genericness of the receiver. How is one to present oneself, sign one's work through an ear that might be less than keen? The answer comes in bold strokes. Major themes intersect in the playfulness of *A Filmmaker's Letter.* To construct a self-presentation that might fill the authenticating vacuum of the vague and unknown audience, Akerman parades her themes and strategies while leaving the problematics of authorship unquestioned.

The film condenses the themes in other Akerman works. Not only Akerman herself but her scenic alter ego, Clément, appears in it. Slipping in a now familiar way between different levels and tones of address—from statements of belief to a mocking self-critique in indirect speech—it ultimately collapses all sorts of writings: "A letter is a script is a script is a script is a letter." The word "letter" is a recurring pun, and its various connotations are explored. Akerman's *à la lettre* embraces literal meaning as it does the law, in this case the Jewish law.

*A Filmmaker's Letter* starts with a black screen and Akerman's voice announcing God's presence and His proscription of the image: "And you shall not make any image that resembles anything over the earth, sea, or sky." In defiance of God's commandment, we see the video's first image—Akerman's face, half-covered by a blanket, peeking at the camera. As she leaps out of bed, she states off-frame, "To make films one must get up." A blank wall replaces the empty bed. Again, Akerman will draw an image over this empty space: this time saying "To make films one must stand up," she jumps up into center frame. Next she magically exhorts Clément's presence by tenderly repeating her name—"Aurore, Aurore, Aurore."

Clément now replays Akerman's formula, jumping out of bed and off frame, then standing up to fill the frame. Here and from now on, she is Akerman's explicit double. In a sense repeating the role of the filmmaker in *Meetings with Anna,* she displays for the camera what the arduous profession of filmmaking involves. How to dress for a meeting with one's producer? How to write and rewrite a script? How to carry film cans? These questions are presented as overacted comic vignettes, all leading to the main issue: how to make films that give pleasure to one's friends?

Underlying this question is Akerman's difficulty in responding to an indeterminate audience. This TV production poses its own demands: it must communicate and, perhaps more significant, must reshape Akerman's image. *Antenne 2* affords Akerman an assurance of signature (of public recognition) that is both challenging and overwhelming; a voice-over introduces her as a prominent artist. This video letter, then, becomes an arena in which she must build her case, a case in a way won and lost in advance.

Anticipating a diffuse audience's hostility to Akerman's style, this generic letter rehearses a metacritique. Akerman reports to an amazed Clément that a friend would rather have her make *Raiders of the Lost Ark* than *Toute une nuit.* Dressed as a man, sitting with Clément, she deflects an expected criticism by stamping it with her personal style: "A friend once told me," she says, "Chantal, you always make films that are too long, you always make films that are too long, you always make films that are too long." As Akerman talks, she speeds up, invoking her talent for concision and her delight in slurring words into sound.

Minor moments such as a filmed production break are filled with references to God and the letter. "At times when I write a letter," Akerman says, "I describe what I see from a window. It has a sensitive and quotidian tone . . . but this is not a letter, it's a script." If looking through a window produces easy matter for a letter, Clément shuts the window. Akerman

remarks, "We the Jews have no images, just the Book." Defying her father's tradition, she declares herself an image maker: "A letter in image is to kill the letter. We'll do it then. Bang bang!"

Akerman's killing of the letter—her announcement that she rejects the Jewish ban on image-making—is compromised from the start by television's need for legibility. The tension between breaking the law and talking about breaking the law is a moot point here: *A Filmmaker's Letter* can only talk about Akerman's style rather than constitute it, didactically displaying the dichotomies—between author and performer, performer and character, speech and writing—that her other work perverts. In *News from Home,* for example, these tensions are actually performed. *A Filmmaker's Letter* simply thematizes them, diffusing their cogency.

Thus the only proof Akerman can cite as evidence of her proclaimed crime is a reproduction of René Magritte's spoof of referentiality, his suggestion of an eternal competition between the logics of image and word. "This is not an orange," Akerman says, presenting an apple; then, replacing the apple with an orange, "This isn't either." She then replaces oranges and apples with a red rose, overlit on a blue velvet top; Gertrude Stein's phrase "A rose is a rose is a rose" is whispered fast and relentlessly, as a chant of "Love me, love me not" takes over the soundtrack. The literalness suggested and defied in Magritte's pun (most cogently in his painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), and the slippage from a literary to a musical and concrete register in Stein, inform all of Akerman's cinema. Here, however, such issues are alluded to without actually informing the work. The contamination of content by rhythm, of illusion by literalness, that gives Akerman's cinema its edge is merely a theme here.

Nothing is actually endangered in this vacuous either/or of word and image, not even, as the success of *A Filmmaker's Letter* shows, Akerman's zest for writing and image making. What is at stake is not the actual killing of the letter but the need to thematize it. *A Filmmaker's Letter* displays Akerman's cinematic strategies through an aesthetics of juxtaposition and allusion. Disjunction, collage, and a light touch provide an image for Akerman that conforms to a dialogic dynamic. The easy legibility of this letter is not a necessary function of a juxtapositional or heterogeneous mode of presenting the self. "Letter" in this video spans a wide range of meanings. Along with Akerman's work, her chamomile tea and diet, her style, the pope, and her Jewishness, the letter is capitalized, as if God couldn't be alone on that count. Arrested by a pressing demand, "letter" translates in *A Filmmaker's Letter* as the law of the father—the respect for an external demand, supposedly that of the audience.

Usually characterized by an anxious incompleteness, the epistolary for-
mat serves a clear function in *A Filmmaker's Letter:* the fragmentary tex-
ture of this letter/video disguises the will for a full, self-contained picture.
It allows Akerman to sign her patronym resolutely, beyond the shadow of
betrayal. In *News from Home,* the filmmaker's signature wavers between
retracing and differing from her mother's voice. *A Filmmaker's Letter*
makes blunt the tremulous certainty of Akerman's own voice.

# 7  THE RHYTHM OF CLICHÉ

## Akerman into the '90s

*In any event repetition is transgression. It questions law, it denounces its normal or general character promoting a deeper and more artistic reality.*—Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, 1968

Chantal Akerman's work has a dry, cumulative intensity. Extended takes, fixed frames, and a resolutely frontal camera position efface the conventions of analytic editing; precise and repeated framings are coupled with a consistent focus on single characters and an insistence on time. In the 1970s films, single protagonists propel the narrative through visible displacements (*Je tu il elle*, 1974, *Meetings with Anna*, 1978) or increasingly charged stillness (*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,* 1975). This premise is reversed in the '80s work—in *Toute une nuit* (All night long, 1982), for example, where Akerman's narrative, though still predicated on accumulation, is spread over multiple episodic threads, as characters couple and decouple according to a logic of the romantic— through longing, sexual desire, boredom. And in *The Eighties* (1983), different performers speak similar lines of dialogue, submitting the same text to variations of rhythm and performance. These "rehearsals" defile the very possibility of an essential, "authentic" fit between speech and performer.

In *Toute une nuit,* Akerman passes from the minimalist narratives of her earlier films to her later, idiosyncratic use of the movie-musical form—a natural outgrowth of her attention to the rhythms of gesture and dialogue,

and to her transformations of them into an antinaturalistic choreography of concreteness. "No links except a musical one, with recurrences and ruptures," says Akerman of *Toute une nuit*'s fragmentary structure.[1] From her first short film, *Saute ma ville* (1968), on, Akerman's work grows steadily more stylized. *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (1984) and *The Man with the Suitcase* (1983) follow the codes of slapstick comedy, *The Eighties* and *Window Shopping* (1986) those of the musical. The difference between these works and films like *Je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman* is less than it might seem: the comedy and the musical forms only exacerbate the manic compulsion of the protagonists' behavior in the earlier films, and they remain vehicles for Akerman's consistent concern with rhythm. The borderlines of these genres are in any case transgressed by the duration of both shots and gestures, here protracted, there compressed.

Akerman's '80s work takes over from her '70s experiments with duration and series. The earlier, structural films comprise systematic examinations of a given space or theme: a welfare hotel (*Hotel Monterey*, 1972), New York City (*News from Home*, 1976), Akerman lying in bed (*La Chambre 2*, 1972). These films' structured exploration of cinematic language is grafted onto a spatial or geographic scan—of a hotel, a city, a room. Their documentation of particular aspects of a site or behavior suggests an experimental ethnography, an element present throughout Akerman's oeuvre, from these first films through the fictional yet hyperattentive depiction of a housewife's routine in *Jeanne Dielman* to the acute observation of Eastern European urban and rural landscapes in the 1993 documentary *D'Est*.

Akerman's turn from linear, albeit elliptical and experimental, narrative films in the mid-'70s to serial structures in the '80s deserves discussion. I have argued that the focus on a single character and the homogeneous texture in *Je tu il elle* and *Meetings with Anna* provide a hint of continuity, a counterbalance to Akerman's narrative and discursive disjunctions. But this sense of continuity is traversed by a serial structure: these films move in blocks of different kinds, dramatic blocks (Anna's series of encounters, each constituting one main sequence in *Meetings with Anna*); discursive blocks (the dialogue-qua-monologues of Jeanne, Anna, etc.); and analytic blocks (*Je tu il elle*'s rehearsal of every possible camera position in a room in relation to the performer's body). This block configuration, particularly in its analytic form, follows the catalogue principle of structural film, and Akerman's serial work is on the face of it involved with cataloguing. Any systematic, exhaustive approach to a given reality, an attempt to encompass that reality's limits, has something of the quality of the catalogue, which aims to provide a structure or heading through which an event can

be read as an element of a given series. The catalogue or list both displays difference and subsumes it under the relevant heading.

To reconstruct a reality through a serial structure is in some way or another to reflect on that reality as a totality. A series of shots—events—can work against teleology if it appears as pure series; or, depending on the paradigmatic quality of each element, it can reconvene into a circular, total picture. These two directions in cataloguing, these two organizational principles (the serial accumulation and the cluster), are principles that Akerman's work cleverly recasts. The romantic situations in *Toute une nuit*, for example, and the series of small performance parts in *The Eighties* are presented in quantity, but the repetition of similar situations (with changing backgrounds, characters, and performance modulations) intimates the very opposite of a catalogue heading: a search for the specificity and individuality of each scene or moment, a search that is successful in *Toute une nuit* and purposefully frustrated in *The Eighties.*

How does a serial structure, a marked pattern in cinematic design, set off a filmic event as singular? Conversely, how does such a repeated pattern (in shot duration, image content, etc.) imply a generic bracket that subsumes all difference as exemplary of a particular genus—life in the city, domestic work, life in Eastern Europe? *Toute une nuit*'s multiple characters and locations, for instance, might appear to have been subsumed within an encompassing paradigm: love in the city at night. But that's too easy a reading: actually, *Toute une nuit* poses the rather delicate question of how to circumvent a totalizing tone when dealing with so many different characters within a single paradigm. The film could easily slide into a representational tokenism, yet, as we shall see, its display of multiplicity in fact directly confronts the notion of representativeness. As with Akerman's conception of type in *Jeanne Dielman* and in *Je tu il elle,* no category, of character or of event, holds against *Toute une nuit*'s pull for singularity. That cinema's indexicality—the singularity of every gesture, site, and sound as film reproduces it—can puncture any blanket denomination or concept is my guiding hypothesis concerning not only *Toute une nuit* but also *D'Est,* Akerman's latest film at the time of writing.

### Eight Times "Oui": Singularity in *Toute une nuit*

*Oui . . . , Oui . . . , Oui . . . , Oui . . . , Oui . . . , Oui . . . , Oui . . . , Oui.*
—Aurore Clément, on the telephone, in the last shot of *Toute une nuit*

Akerman's boldness as a filmmaker lies in her charging the mundane with significance. In *Jeanne Dielman,* both long takes of everyday tasks (the

kitchen scenes) and nontakes (the elided sex scenes) stand for a radical new visibility. *Toute une nuit* again takes the banal to task as Akerman braves the formally and thematically depleted territory of the love story. The film concentrates on the brief moments that often constitute the turning points of traditional feature films—the parting, the embrace, the moment of sexual longing. It rescues singularity and energy precisely where the pressure of convention has turned the representation of love into cliché.

Theme and narrative here are governed by a principle of match and mismatch that also provides the film's formal trope. In fact two principles of organization struggle for priority in the film: a visual and thematic continuity, arising from the recurrence of characters and sets, evokes a model of linear narrative that is countered by a principle of multiplicity and interruption. Given the sheer diversity of the film's situations and locations, recurrence becomes insufficient to guarantee a linear story. Instead, it begins to shape *Toute une nuit* as a structured accumulation.

Opposing the conventional plot format of conflict, climax, and then resolution, Akerman's narrative is structured as a single major movement composed of minor variations—a fugal structure. Eighty characters and several locations shatter the idea of the "film with two characters in a room," shaping Akerman's desire for effervescence.[2] In a succinct hour and a half, the film moves from evening to morning. Its spatial coordinates traverse three main areas of Brussels: a middle-class suburban condominium, an older building facing a square (La Vielle Halle aux Blés) in the center of town, and a poorer and ethnic area (mostly populated by Arabs), also in the city's center, where the bars stay open late. This relatively straightforward temporal and spatial frame—a single night, and a group of recognizable sites—is broken into fragments, fractured into the scenes of the many micronarratives. It stands as a set of external coordinates that create a counterpoint, an obliviousness, to the rhythm of both cinematic and profilmic events. *Toute une nuit* shares this working principle with structural film.

In *Toute une nuit* each fragment takes two minutes or less of screen time to activate an entire imaginary narrative. Akerman's editing allows no completion—as if through some fault of the cut, the promise of convergence she holds out is never fulfilled. This disarticulated narrative has the transient quality of a frustrated encounter between two people. The familiar film conventions of transparent editing and sound are used inconsistently, within a cinematic structure that is broken and nontotalizing. Each microscene could potentially expand into an entire film. *Toute une nuit*

grafts a minimalist structure onto a splintered melodramatic matrix. The ratio between the scenes' internal density and their length is crucial.

Rarely named, the characters are at first identified through their surroundings or homes. They leave their domestic spaces for the street, the hotel, or, as a member of an older suburban couple, who are going out dancing, says, "la ville." Especially in the suburban condominium, doors mark the borders between suffocating interiors and the energy of the city at night. The film privileges passageways, stairs, and shared spaces of different kinds, spaces of transit that make explicit the deliberate sense of randomness and transience in Akerman's mise-en-scène. Stairs, for instance, link floors and lead characters to their destinations. But Akerman's cuts between one character climbing and another waiting are visual matches only; the expected meeting is denied. Several couples and micronarratives share spaces, and the cuts within and among these situations are often (though not always) perfect, showing Akerman weaving a homogeneous texture—which she then contradicts by resolutely denying convergence. No character or couple interacts with any other in the film except through Akerman's formidable editing. Narrative is subverted by cinema's most banal narrative trick—editing for continuity.

Elsewhere, establishing shots hold out the hope that Akerman will fit several stories together into a larger one, a macronarrative, or even into a governing theme—shared space, for example, a noticeable structuring principle in the film. The common areas in *Toute une nuit* are the cinematic equivalent of paradigmatic frames, evoking the survey or the ethnographic study, in which differences between individual characters are subsumed under some encompassing category such as "suburban life" or "urban nightlife." In creating only a simulacrum of convergence, however, these shared areas perversely preempt totality.

The thematic similarities among several scenes, and their grouping *as* similar, also become more than a structuring principle of the film: Akerman's systematic exploration of a theme, like her exploration of a given space, works to cancel the possibility of a purely structural accumulation. The hint of the catalogue in *Toute une nuit* ends up not affirming but calling into question the idea of gathering scenes or images into a thematic cluster or coherent whole. Akerman's structure of fragments is placed in a liminal position, touching on several filmic models—narrative, structural, minimalist, and the city-symphony film, a poetic and avant-garde mode of social documentary—but not quite conforming to them.

*Toute une nuit*'s seriality, for example, evokes yet departs from the '70s minimalist road narrative exemplified by James Benning's *11 × 14* (1976).[3]

*Toute Une Nuit*'s thematic, fragmentary structure also invites comparison with the city-symphony film genre. In this genre of film, each shot or scene metonymically reconfirms a totality by implying the possibility of accounting for urban multiplicity through an analogously fractured structure. The city symphony consistently follows two organizational principles described by William Uricchio in a discussion of Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City:* "Throughout the diversity of locations, activities and class, meaning is created through cluster editing and coherence provided by the clock."[4] Akerman uses the notion of the clock (or of the natural cycle) to create a sense of limit and therefore of drama. In *Toute une nuit,* the road principle—the cumulative yet transient, ateleological progression—is intercepted and dramatized by the curve of another, timed progression: the cycle of one night.

Akerman's dialogue with the city-symphony film necessitates a brief discussion of the relations between part and whole in a variety of analogously structured films. To describe the formal film, the avant-garde mode preceding structural film, P. Adams Sitney uses the notion of the mosaic, "a tight nexus of content, a shape designed to explore the facets of the material." He derives this term from the title of Peter Kubelka's film *Mosaik,* a term that expresses "this conscious aspiration. Recurrences, prolepses, antitheses, and overall rhythms are the rhetoric of the formal."[5] Discussing a different genre, the direct-cinema documentary work of Frederick Wiseman, Bill Nichols also uses the notion of the mosaic to describe how Wiseman's assumption that "social events have multiple causes and must be analyzed as webs of interconnecting influences and patterns" leads him toward a poetic rather than a narrative organization. Nichols refines his analysis by suggesting that Wiseman's work, which displays recognizable narrative sequences, differs from other mosaic structures in that "the tesserae [facets] merge to yield a coherent whole when seen from a distance, whereas an individual facet conveys little sense of the overall design."[6]

The tension in the mosaic is that between part and whole: the mosaic structure can be problematic as a way to reveal singularity. This limitation reflects the epistemological quandary of sociological and ethnographic film in general. (The alternatives of the case study and the statistic are one example of this methodological predicament.) The disadvantages of the mosaic appear when one considers how it organizes the procedures of sampling in several ethnographic films. At stake in the rhetoric of observational and ethnographic cinema is the notion that reality is only truly represented if it is not subjected to fragmentation, selection, and

intervention—all processes implicit in film editing. The alternative is the holistic approach—the attempt to represent whole bodies, or an event's entire duration. This approach finds parallels in the equally totalist anxiety exemplified by the collage or sampling method, the idea that categories (of activity, age group, space, etc.) can be defined through representative samples that when combined, allow something like complete coverage of a given social reality.[7] Here the mosaic's individual facet—the event, gesture, or line of dialogue, even if presented unfragmented and entire—becomes a "tessera" within an encompassing preexisting thesis.

The diversity of Akerman's "sampling" in *Toute une nuit*, though, voids the idea of a coherent whole. Indeed, given the number of characters, some of them markedly individual in ethnicity or sexual preference, the risk the film runs is that of tokenism, the inclusion of characters for the sake of representativeness. Still, the film's rhythm and direction are those of accumulation—of energy, sweat, and desire, never of an ideal categorical unity.

The film depicts, for instance, a succession of women of all ages, fleeing from oppressive interiors into the night and the city: a girl with a cat; an adolescent at a window, who then tiptoes down the stairs; a wife who loudly packs, leaves, and then returns—her snoring husband's obliviousness serving as the backdrop for her theatrical exit and entrance. Compounding Akerman's rhythmic design, these moves give the "leaving" situation a farcical touch, but what grafts them on our memory is their repetition, their resonance as imagistic déjà vus, their demand that we acknowledge them as rerepresentations. These microscenes straddle the anecdote and its deflection into the catalogue entry: they are subject to a general category or figure, such as "escape,"[8] yet at the same time, through hyperbole and ellipsis, Akerman's editing and mise-en-scène shape them as singular.

Marsha Kinder, in "The Subversive Potential of the Pseudo-iterative," helpfully points out that the microscenes in *Toute une nuit* are "presented to suggest that these or similar events occur every night."[9] Making this point about the scenes' iterative nature, however, she also suggests that "characters are no longer singular . . . [and] no longer hold a privileged place in the narrative."[10] Although I agree with Kinder's observations on the abstractive pull of Akerman's fragmented seriality, one need only compare Akerman's images with those of another experimental narrative using paradigmatic substitution—Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers*—to note the contest in *Toute une nuit* between the series and the singularity of the images presented. This insistence on the uniqueness of each incident in a

paradigmatic series, an insistence that runs against the images' cliché thematics, is Akerman's specific contribution to cinematic typification. If Hollywood's traditional narratives make the singulative (the "unique" love affair) a déjà vu, Akerman recovers the uniqueness of passion by setting it up against the notions of repetition and cliché.

In taking up love and passion, dominant themes in countless commercial narrative movies, Akerman forces a consideration of the notion of singularity. Piling up scenes that refer in one way or other to romantic desire, she insists that a scene's claim to uniqueness lies in its brush with redundancy. Defying the banality of cliché, these microscenes profess the freshness of an original motivation: it is as if they "said" love for the first time. Their contrast between the platitudinous and the intense gives *Toute une nuit* an unclassifiable force, neither a *chant d'amour*—there are too many birds singing the same song—nor a parodic demeaning of the petit rituals of love.

*Toute une nuit* is the opposite of *Jeanne Dielman* in that it is a film of mostly "significant moments," exuberantly multiplied climactic instants relating to desire, and rebounding from the fictive space of classical cinema's narrative and melodrama. Like Roland Barthes's *Fragments of a Lover's Discourse,* it is concerned with the resonance of certain figures of passion as they are snatched from sources in personal experience, literature, and film. The difference between the film and Barthes's book, however, is not only the difference between the descriptive and rhetorical possibilities of literature and cinema; it is a matter of trajectory.

Barthes's gesture is critical: he defines the lover's discourse as a personal claim to singularity in passion, but, with a descriptive finesse that balances detail and intertextuality, he construes the love event as at most a representational reality. Akerman's film claims the romantic gesture through the particularity of cinema's indexical image, unraveling the many examples that lead to Barthes's synthetic descriptions, demanding the spectator's confrontation with gestures (that is, with their images) that at some point generate a rhetoric of love without meaning. By presenting particular ways of embracing, hesitating, dancing, particular looks, tempos, and intensities, Akerman uses cinema's indexicality to foreground what is irreducible in a gesture (and by implication in passion). Further, she intensifies each of the situations she shows through the minimal amount of time she allots each grand gesture (embrace, recognition, first kiss, etc.), as well as through the repetition of similar coupling moves.

Not all of the film's tiny scenes are climactic turning points. It is rather the economy and clarity of Akerman's focus that give inordinate signifi-

cance to mundane gestures. Her mix of drained drama with excessive and resolute moves defies a corrective or ultimate (transparent) presentation of reality. In playing on the overvisibility of the cliché, Akerman gives yet another meaning to ellipsis. Her cutting of her scenes constantly renews the frustration (and suggestiveness) of lack. It accumulates the imaginary resonances of scene and unseen up to the point of cancellation. Perhaps in this sense more than any other, *Toute une nuit* defies the romantic while avoiding the sentimental. If the romantic thrives at the margins of the possible, and at the limits of representation itself, sentimentality is bloated feeling, an overdose of evidence. *Toute une nuit*'s stylized concreteness mocks both the idealism of thinking love to be unrepresentable and the need for explanation.

Moving away from a poetic analysis of passion, Akerman infuses her representations of desire with an original energy not amenable to exemplarity, much less to cataloguing. The film's gestures are as unexpected as they are banal. As much as her cuts, her mise-en-scène creates a rhythm that is always "improper," inappropriate. Movement within shots, within sequences, and among scenes is now excessive (in the series of men pulling women into cabs and doorways), now subdued (in a dramatic and performative style that is minimal and boldly surprising.

A series of scenes of couples formed after a casual collision insists that desire veers toward the abolition of distance. Akerman stages this basic axiom as a matter of gravitational energy. Her physics of desire dictates that after standing by each other's side for a while, bodies simply and momentously spark in a single collision which disrupts private orbits. Desire, hinted at through brief sidelong glances, becomes more graphic and pressing as the two neighbors in a bar coincidently bump against each other. Accident made necessity, Akerman's mise-en-scène asserts the couple's right to contact by letting them dance while she cuts to two other microscenes before returning to "their scene." The song on the juke box plays through twice as they dance; their clumsiness, a choreography of its own, precariously conflates movement and the need for embrace.

Two intersecting rhythms animate the film. One is personal, throbbing through Akerman's cinematic physis; it speaks in the first person, it says desire. The second cadence, that of natural running time, qualifies this private utterance. The passage from night to day draws an inexorable line. Although each rhythm is made of multiple points, each is precise enough to precipitate romance into disinterest without further notice.

Akerman dodges allusion. She charges her images with affect by hyperbolizing certain gestures, by sabotaging motivational structure, by cutting

Strangers between glances in *Toute une nuit* (1982). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

and compressing the preludes and aftereffects of a motion or emotion. She represents desire solely through its movement—its actual displacement of energy, its unequivocal imparting of a signal to the film's characters. One would then imagine a film made solely of charged dramatic moments, yet Akerman's mise-en-scène revokes even that certainty. Her staging of passion hovers between deflated drama and spiraling choreography.

Akerman refuses explanation, and her use of real time is, among other things, a strategy for countering the intensity of meaning that her little scenarios invoke. At the same time, her long takes, displaying actions ranging from impatience to inertia, allow the space surrounding the performers to register. This space is never vapid; it is full of descriptive clues that place the characters socially. What is avoided on a narrative level is subtly smuggled in through a realistic visual texture. Each of the film's fragments is charged with an entire narrative of placement: where a character comes from, his or her cultural and economic background. All this is grafted into a one-minute or thirty-second scene, an episode that may never reappear. The rhythm of the action, the timing of the editing, may rupture the familiar styles of mise-en-scène, but Akerman doesn't tamper with the reality of the setting.

Most of the many characters who parade through the film are seen once; others reappear, drafting a provisional ending to their story in the morning. These recurrences are supposed to negotiate the contrasting rhythms

Strangers meet and dance with each other in *Toute une nuit* (1982). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

of impulsive nighttime romance and daybreak. The ever-suspended resolution asserting its demand, the characters' reappearances carry the burden of a need for closure. But the tempo of a given character's second scene isn't significantly different from that of the first. Defining these second scenes as closures are their new spurts of romantic energy, which have the circular quality of a movement of return. A couple embrace desperately after rain, the wife returns to her snoring husband, another wife leaves her lover in a motel lobby.

Akerman's documentary on Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Tanztheater, *One Day Pina Asked Me*—made in 1983, one year after *Toute une nuit*—displays Akerman's take on the peculiar rhythm of passion and drama. Akerman's affinity with Bausch is limited. Both use compression, elision, and repetition to comment on the clichéd rhetoric of desire, but they part ways in Akerman's resolute antiromanticism. Akerman dries out the spectacular from Bausch's choreography with a single perverse stroke: she has the dancers repeat some of the moves in the Tanztheater's deconstruction of melodrama, but without music and against the neutral background of a restricted backstage area. Punctuating the film's recording of rehearsals, interviews, and shows, these brief scenarios of passion as power starkly disclose the nature of the seductiveness in Bausch's choreography. Without their tangos and other romantic scores, these mechanically repeated gestures of violence, fear, and desire are drained of their transcendental lure.

In this sense, *Toute une nuit*'s last scene offers the perfect closure to Akerman's proposal of a "dry" musical. Aurore Clément (the first recognizable character in the film) returns; she waits for someone, meets someone else, and as they dance she repeats a few sentences nonstop in a monotone: "How hot it is." "I love him passionately." "I tried to resist but couldn't." The litanylike quality of this discourse and Clément's stylized dance toward the camera with a male substitute in a narrow corridor allude to Marguerite Duras's *India Song*, and to its romantic reliance on absence. In Duras's film, Delphine Seyrig (central in Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, made the same year as *India Song*) dances with several lovers as a voice-over dialogue both signals and fills in the blanks in passion. It is the same disjunction as in *Toute une nuit:* the dance with someone else and the impossible dialogue that verges on pure text. An excess of discourse is made a signifier of passion in absentia.

Suddenly, however, this romantic suspension, this temporal and spatial bracketing, is interrupted. The telephone rings, the music (where does it come from?) stops, and Clément moves toward the next room. She picks up the phone; as the man waits, lying on her bed, she focuses on an unheard voice and rhythmically utters the word "yes" eight times. This is all she says. The rupture from the early part of the scene is radical. In its collapsing of text and speech, Clément's initial monologue had signaled a kind of short circuitry of address. As the telephone rings, though, this suggestion of an impossible or oblique dialogue is bluntly laid aside along with the corny romantic song. The remnants of romantic modernist transcendality—absence and ambiguity as signifiers/signifieds par excellence—are swiftly traded for an alternative positing of passion: instead of a suggestive (and romantic) suspension, Akerman has Clément say "oui." The sound from the street is very loud; laying over it a single syncopated word, Akerman composes a concretist score that finally moves the night's intensity into the morning.

## Night and Day and Night: The Cycle Revisited

Ten years after *Toute une nuit*, Akerman returns, very differently, to the notion of the cycle. *Toute une nuit* stretches out a single night by bringing ever more characters to this hot, orgiastic summer dark-to-dawn. But finally, albeit reluctantly, it concedes to the reappearance of day. In *Night and Day* (1991), the characters try to trick time. By refusing to sleep, Julie, the film's protagonist, rejects the notion of the natural cycle. In an attempt to balance night and day, her desire for her lover Jack and her desire for her

Julie and Jack during the day, Guilane Londez and Thomas Langmann in *Night and Day* (1991). Still, courtesy of International Film Circuit.

lover Joseph, she lives the bliss of love as a kind of vagueness, a happier version of the liminal state of another Julie—the character Akerman herself plays in *Je tu il elle.* That earlier film's formal liminality and shifterlike character are somehow given a plot in *Night and Day,* through Julie's more obviously existentialist fiction of freedom. This simpler narrative of deterritorialized desire ends with Julie leaving the apartment she has shared with Jack, with a purposeful walk—she knows where she is going.

*Night and Day* tells the story of Julie, Jack, and their perfect love. Coming from the country to the big city, the two youngsters know no one and need no one. Spending their days making love, they need no telephone. They also say they need no child: if they had a child they would need a telephone, and that, they say, "we do not want." Friends, telephone, kid— "only next year," they decide. "Next year," the start of normality, clearly marks the end of romance.[11]

Mirroring the film's circular narrative, Julie and Jack live in a serpentine apartment, its rooms connected by a flanking corridor and by a plank joining the kitchen and the bathroom windows. They can talk across these doubled framing windows, but they can also easily miss each other as they look for and follow each other through this meandering space. Julie is overflowing with passion; at nights, when Jack drives a cab, she starts

sleeping with Joseph. A voice-over narration explains that it is only be-
cause she has a surplus of love for Jack that she can sleep with another
man. For the sake of narrative symmetry, and also in a reference to a
characterological device that is virtually a cliché of the French New Wave
(in Truffaut's *Jules and Jim,* Godard's *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick,*
etc.), Joseph is a permutation of Jack—he drives Jack's cab during the day,
when Jack is off work.

Similarly, though logic and statistics tell us that Jack could drive his cab
through Paris for a year without ever meeting Julie in the streets, cinematic
coincidence allows Julie to watch Joseph's lonely wanderings from the
cab's window as she betrays him by driving with Jack at night. By the same
token, Jack can see Julie "in a world of her own" but can miss Joseph in a
sight gag—he has bent down to tie his shoelaces. In *Toute une nuit,* Aker-
man shattered the usual unit of the French romantic film—the room; in
*Night and Day,* Paris, the big city, is reduced to the size of the room, a space
in which the members of a ménage à trois keep narrowly missing. Julie and
Jack's sinuous apartment represents the city as an interspaced net, which
separates at the same time as it allows communication. Here, Jack may say
something Joseph has said the night before, giving Julie a sense of a *déjà
entendu.* And dreams and repeated phrases may create a rhythm of verbal
slips, of almost missed encounters.

In Julie's, Jack's, and Joseph's reasoning, cause and effect obey the same
precarious order as night and day, or Jack and Joseph, do in the film's
structure. The series night-and-day-and-night-and-day-and . . . follows
the same perverse lack of hierarchy that informs the protagonists' be-
havior. *Night and Day* reiterates an old concern of Akerman's: how can
balance be maintained within a serial accumulation? How can Julie, in her
sexual elation, strike a poise without tipping the symmetry one way or
another? How can she move from night to day to night without sleeping—
without reestablishing some form of natural closure?

"Don't fall asleep, Julie, you know what happens to people who fall
asleep," warns Joseph. The warning comes too late. Julie starts to attach
importance to such phrases as "It doesn't matter" or "That's not impor-
tant." Her thinking becomes more and more wordy, its rhythm more and
more accelerated, as she tries to explain the rupture in her perfect equi-
librium, making the rupture of her earlier bliss clear by sheer excess. *Night
and Day* thematizes the lack of hierarchy that informs Akerman's seriality,
an excess that in the mid-'80s figures the strongest in her adoption of the
musical and of singing.

### So Let's Sing: *The Eighties* and *Window Shopping*

Akerman's interest in multiplicity—of performers, scenes, and textures (video and film)—can be seen as a flirtation with the aesthetics of juxtaposition. The courting of serial variation present in *Toute une nuit* appears more clearly in her experimental musical *The Eighties*.[12] In an early script for the film, then entitled "La Galerie," Akerman states her intent: "While leaning on 'sociologically precise' facts we have not hesitated to push situations toward the melodrama—to use old vaudeville procedures such as recognitions, pursuits, confusing quarrels, quid pro quos . . . but we are also intent in tearing away the cliché."[13] Akerman has stated that *The Eighties* is "like a work in progress. It begins with an audition for a musical I want to make. Then the last fifteen minutes are a sort of dummy run with songs, routines, etc., to give the producer some idea of what the real film would be like. . . . as I have never worked in that area [musical] before, I made *The Eighties* as a sort of pilot, to prove I was capable of it."[14] *The Eighties,* about people who work in neighboring shops in a fashion mall, parades a dizzying number of disjunctive strategies under the guise of transferring a casting rehearsal from video to film. At the film's end, an intertitle introduces "The Project." A scene recorded in film is a version of the movie musical's grand finale, when all mingle in dance and song. *The Eighties* starts with a black screen and two distinct voices: First, a woman repeats the phrase, "At your age, grief soon wears off." Then Akerman's voice corrects the actress's intonations, a sequence that works as an exposé of the subtleties of performance. Other dialogues follow, with Akerman serving as coach, both feeding the performers their lines and playing the interlocutor. Four or five sequences of banal dialogue are heard: "Robert, Robert darling, I've lost him." "She's the one he loved." "I knew but I hoped, I love him, I love him so. . . . Now it's all over, all is over, no one will love me." Each of these lines will be repeated by one or more performers at different points in the film. Next, Akerman's voice is superimposed on and seems to control a series of vignettes in which either a woman or a man leans on a wall and waits: "You wait, with an ad-like smile, you see him (her), you smile, he (she) doesn't see you, you look disappointed."

The fragmentary structure, spatial distribution, and dialogue quality of *The Eighties* recalls the "world of interiors" of the soap opera.[15] For Robert Allen, the soap's "paradigmatic complexity" activates "a reservoir of relational possibilities" in a "world represented as an aggregate of atomistic

interiors."[16] Soaps focus the viewer's attention "almost exclusively on facial expression and figure relationship."[17] No one character "can be singled out as the motor of the narrative."[18] The format has a high degree of redundancy, in that the same piece of news is often voiced by several different characters in several different episodes. What matters is not the knowledge that, say, Lucy is pregnant but the way different characters react to this information.[19] All these qualities appear in *The Eighties*—redundancy, for example, when clichéd remarks are repeatedly voiced by different performers.

The film seems to mock the desire for plot that its charged exchanges elicit. The soap opera's constant interruption by and multiplication of subplots are here shaped as a performative instability, a narrative overflow created through a minimum of text. Hearing these repeated spoken fragments, we wait to see a perfect match between them and a body or voice. The film engages us, then, in what we assume is Akerman's work in the film—the casting and directing of performances. The notion of a natural, organic relation between performers and text is on constant trial in *The Eighties;* we often experience it as "almost" successful, yet the excess of these performance permutations places them beyond a reflexive function. The performances modulate the clichéd exchanges in a sort of test of their banality range.

*The Eighties* presents the soap opera's melodramatic energy in its skeletal form: dialogues and microscenes are suffused with melodramatic promise, but the promise is unfulfilled. One has no clue who the "he" or "she" is in a scrap of dialogue, not to mention the "he" or "she" who speaks it. The transient linkage between person and utterance blocks the hint of plot that a dialogue may suggest; along with their dialogue bits, performers and characters float above narrative causality and dramatic effect. The dissemination of this procedure across the entire film intensifies the unsettling function of the pronominal shifters—the "I's" and "you's" that continuously address each other.

The question remains: Why would anyone care who the characters are who would speak such dialogue? Three years later, Akerman answered that question with *Window Shopping,* a film in which the banality of a love story's twists and turns is delivered alongside the singing and dancing of the musical format, in a mix of music and the mundane like that found in Jacques Demy's films. *Window Shopping* tells the story of Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig) and her encounter, after 30 years, with her first love, an American she had met during the war. It also tells of Mado, who is in love with Robert, Jeanne's son, who is in love with Lili, Mado's boss in the hair

Delphine Seyrig sings in *Window Shopping* (1986). Still, courtesy of World Artists Release.

salon that stands in front of the clothes shop owned by Robert's family in the fashion mall. Lili goes out with Robert but is supported by M. Jean. And it tells of Aurore (Clément), who serves juice and coffee at a counter in the middle of the mall and who gets letters from her lover, who works in Canada to make money for them both.

All that is said in the film is at one point or another also sung. *Window Shopping* presents what Demy hid when he overdubbed Seyrig as the Lilac Fairy in *Donkey Skin:* Seyrig's faltering singing. *Window Shopping* finally "makes sense" of the exchanges made ambiguous in *The Eighties:* they reappear here as talks between Lili and her lover M. Jean, who pays the bills; or between Lili and her former boyfriend, Robert, across a fitting-room curtain. "At your age grief soon wears off," the unplaced phrase that opens *The Eighties,* is here spoken by Jeanne when Mado, wearing a wedding dress, discovers that Robert, soon to be her husband, still loves Lili. In *Window Shopping*'s sole venture outside the claustrophobic enclosure of clichés that is the mall, the film's sole breath of air, Robert's father, Jeanne, and Mado stroll together out in the street, the older couple consoling the younger woman. This man of commerce equates love and fashion: availability, fit, and the desire for a certain style explains the lover's fickleness,

as well as the right time for mating. This is what guarantees that Mado will find someone else to love: "After all," says the father, "did you ever see anyone naked on the streets?"

If this cardboard philosophy perfectly caps the vacuity of *Window Shopping*'s tale, we still have to account for Akerman's desire to tell this story twice, to base two films on the same set of characters and texts. Clearly, her desire to make a musical has stretched across two films with very different aesthetics. (The very existence of *The Eighties* attests to her determination to work with this soap-opera material; she had difficulty raising the money for the project.) To "repeat" the same story in two separate works—the rough, fragmented *The Eighties* (the "draft") and the polished *Window Shopping* (the "final product")—isn't really evidence of a desire to comment on the myths of authenticity in the musical.[20] The ambition of these films, with their mélange of surface textures, is something other than anti-illusionist: what matters is that the full weight of banality be reexperienced through the cliché—that banality recover its repetitive intensity, or that it display its claustrophobic design.

The texture of *Window Shopping* is relatively unfractured by comparison to the juxtaposition of video and film, rehearsal and finished scenes, and dialogues and songs in *The Eighties*. Modeled on the musical, with its eruption of song and dance amid narrative, *Window Shopping* is initially baffling as an Akerman product.[21] Perhaps it can be seen as the culmination of her desire to incorporate the gaiety and intensity of music in film. If the work is unsuccessful, it may be because the choice of the musical format is deemed sufficient in itself to create intensity. And yet, in looking at how *Window Shopping* fails to attain the spontaneity and freedom of the musical, one misses how this fashion-mall gossip chamber formally matches its stale suffocation with the thematics of stasis that is so central to Akerman. The strict conformity to the idea of a musical reveals, in the film's overall texture, the very opposite of the vivacity of the genre. The film's claustrophobic setting and narrative platitudes are coated with a smothering polish that deadens both narrative and song and dance. And this polish can be understood within Akerman's particular form of distanciation—that of hyperrealist layering.

*The Eighties*'s fragments, on the other hand, at first apparently part of a reflexive thrust in cinema, also work to intensify the melodramatic affect of the love song or soap-opera dialogue. *The Eighties* defeats the idea of an original source through its dizzying parade of exchanges (not for a single moment does a performer coalesce as a character). Moreover, this *mise-en-abîme* set in motion by the film's performatic instability is pervaded by

dialogue clichés. *The Eighties* thus poses a question at the core of post-modernist aesthetics: Is the film stating the impossibility of difference or, cumulatively, through a putative emerging *différance,* stating the force of the cliché? By embracing postmodernist aesthetics, *The Eighties* breaks Akerman's delicate balance between the voiding principle of the series (where any single exchange or shot equals any other) and the cumulative movement of serial accumulation in both the form and the content of every scene and shot in, for instance, *Toute une nuit* and *News from Home.* In contrast to these earlier films, *The Eighties*'s fragments are truly centerless. Their scattered quality appears both in the film's structure—its rapid editing—and within its shifterlike scenes and characters.

*The Eighties*'s rejection of linearity and its absorption of mass-media elements attest to a postmodern digestive system that radically abstracts the musical and the soap opera, releasing their intensity in a sort of spewed-up narrative mass. The film's fragmentary structure keeps its pop elements—the musical's song, the soap opera's dialogue—intact. It feeds off their energy. The very suspension of a given bit of dialogue's narrative consequence turns it into a reverberant unit akin to the interrupted scenes in *Toute une nuit.* These narrative bits parallel the songs that punctuate both films.

That Akerman is drawn to popular, even schmaltzy elements is evident in her use of her performers as *chansonniers.* In *One Day Pina Asked Me,* Akerman enjoys a song by Cole Porter twice: first, she asks a performer in his dressing room to tell the story of his number, a silent-language version of "The Man I Love." Then we see the number in Bausch's presentation onstage, as he lip-syncs and gestures to a recorded female voice. In *The Eighties* we hear a blond actress sing "La Complainte de la serveuse automatique," a dark woman sing Edith Piaf's "Les Mots d'amour," an Arabic-looking man sing a love song in Arabic, and another actress sing Marlene Dietrich's main song from *The Blue Angel.* Most songs are sung in their entirety, and the quality of the performance matters less than the feeling put into the singing.

Akerman's grafting of spectacle onto dailiness through song follows the French tradition rather than the American. The expansion of realism into fantasy is certainly part of the entertainment-as-utopia motor of the American musical,[22] but it has a forcefully different function in the French context. French modern films check the dryness of their antinaturalism with a nostalgia for the emotional affect of singing. From René Clair to Jean Renoir (*Le Petit Théâtre de Jean Renoir*), from Jean-Luc Godard to Demy and Akerman, French filmmakers let singing revise the verbal track, chan-

neling the wordiness of the French language into an emotive rhythmic force.[23] As early as *Meetings with Anna,* for instance, Akerman's dialogue-qua-monologues stretch toward a singsong expressivity.

In *The Eighties,* Akerman herself sings in the studio, the song echoing mechanically from the sound-mixer's space, reproducing her detailed but hammy performance. When she apologizes to the mixer for an off-key moment—"Je me suis debordée là" (I went off the track there)—the lyrics here are Akerman's, and the words are from a letter supposedly sent from Canada by Aurore's lover. It is also at this moment that one notes the particular emphasis, acted out or natural, on schmaltz as an expression of that which transcends any formal concern. The words of this letter unequivocally state the incommensurable dimensions of love. But Akerman's lit-up face and broad gestures are also excessive. Disproportion often takes a musical shape in her films, and music and singing are often meant to disrupt an all-too-elegant cinematic design. Akerman's brush with the musical runs deeper than a momentary reach for a different, lighter mode: paradigmatically abstracted in *The Eighties* or frozen in a caricature of spontaneity in *Window Shopping,* the musical is for Akerman the cheerful form of a basic perversion, an overflowing of affect present in all of the filmmaker's work.

As Aurore sings her second love letter to her customers, she distractedly repeats a work gesture: as her right hand holds the letter, she dips an ice cream scoop energetically from one container to the next with her left. She manages to serve a few people, and even to sing the entire letter, as she moves carefully between two lines of customers swinging to the melody. Yet I associate Aurore's peculiar, displaced gesture—of work sliding into mess—with Akerman. It's true that this kind of distraction at the moment of singing appears often in musicals; I think of Ann-Margret efficiently preparing sandwiches as she sings and dances in *Viva Las Vegas.* But in Akerman's work the combination of divergent movements is not a display of physical coordination or part of a spectacle. Rather, as in traditional American musicals, it signals an intensity of feeling that makes prioritization impossible.

Chantal Akerman sings her lyrics out of tune in *The Eighties* (1983). Still, courtesy of World Artists Release.

Aurore sings and serves ice cream, Aurore Clément in *The Eighties* (1983). Still, courtesy of Collection of the Cinématèque Québecoise.

The duet, Maria de Medeiros and Pascale Salkin in *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (1984). Still, courtesy of the British Film Institute Stills, Posters and Designs.

"So let's sing," says the "J'ai froid" character to the "J'ai faim" one in *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (I'm hungry, I'm cold, 1984). Singing, they have decided, is the only thing they can do besides "sewing, counting, reading, and writing." "I love singing but I sing out of tune," says one, and "I sing in key but I raise my voice when I sing," says the other. *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* is Akerman's episode in *Paris vue par: Vingt ans après* (*Paris Seen: Twenty Years Later*) an omnibus film that repeats the formula of focusing on Paris present in the New Wave film *Paris vue par . . .* (*Six in Paris*) from 1965. Twelve minutes long, Akerman's section portrays two young Belgian women visiting Paris for the first time. They move and pause, one always slightly behind, as if in an opera duet. They look to the front as they talk, and a refrain punctuates their stroll through the streets of Paris: "J'ai faim," says one, "J'ai froid," says the other. Sometimes the second one answers, "Moi aussi" (Me too). Moving fast, they contradict themselves just as fast: "I feel like falling in love," says one, "Me too," says the other, but when, soon after, two young men approach them, they slap the men's faces. They show each other how their boyfriends used to kiss, and why it didn't work: "Ouch," says one after a demonstration kiss, "it hurts." One of them goes to bed with a man they have just met at a restaurant, as the other, always hungry, voraciously gobbles some barely cooked eggs. A scream is heard, and as the famished character rushes to see what has happened, her friend leaves the bed, saying "Now it's done." After this rite of initiation the film ends, with both characters walking down the street, their backs to us.

But this droll comedy of decision really climaxes in the scene right before the sex: hungry, and having just discussed their limited ability to work, they look for a way out. Deciding to sing for money they join their voices in a shrill chant to the startled customers in a restaurant. Their singing interrupts the film's call-and-response format, its repetitions, and its symmetry, creating, amidst the witty dialogue and formal precision, an oasis of chaos.

### Echoes from the East: *Histoires D'Amérique and D'Est*

*Of course it is a kind of piping. Why not? piping is our people's daily speech, only many a one pipes his whole life and does not know it, where here piping is set free from the fetters of daily life and it sets us free too for a little while. We certainly should not want to do without these performances.*—Franz Kafka. "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk," 1924

We have seen Akerman's special sensitivity to the expressive possibilities of popular songs and singsong dialogue. Exploring language at the border

of its referential power, she wants her verbal tracks to end up "as a bla, bla, bla, as psalmody."[24] Akerman's comparison of her antinaturalistic use of text—her flat, monotone dialogues, her songs—to the liturgical practice of psalmody betrays her recognition of the shared ground between her modernist sensibility and her Jewish identity.

On a tour of California in January 1933, the German modernist choreographer Mary Wigman,[25] provided a clear image for the religious-cultural nexus of Judaism and modernism that informs Akerman's work when she described the quality of her Jewish performers:

> Do you remember the Dybbuk? How the Chassidim first discuss the matters of everyday life—the petty business of the village? Then subtly how their voices change? In a crescendo they rise to argue about the Talmud. Now the voices carry quite another musical sound. The crescendo expands once again—oh so delicately, suavely, imperceptibly—into an ecstasy of prayer which becomes the song and finally the dance.[26]

Ascribing the dancers' creative rhythm to an "ecstasy of prayer," to their tapping of "snatches of Jewish folk melodies" that they "build dances upon" and "use the chant for accompaniment,"[27] Wigman anticipates not only the basis but the direction of Akerman's style and thematics. The switch from daily life into chant, from content into rhythm, corresponds to the "deterritorialization" of meaning that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss in their *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* a book Akerman has said explains the nature of her own cinema. In Kafka, according to Deleuze and Guattari, "The sound or the word . . . no longer belongs to a language of sense, even though it derives from it, nor is it an organized music or song, even though it might appear to be."[28] This "line of escape from sense" relates to Akerman's own alogical use of language: like Kafka and Samuel Beckett, she pursues a "willed poverty," transmuting content into rhythm the way children repeat "a word, the sense of which is only vaguely felt in order to make it vibrate around itself."[29]

Deleuze and Guattari trace the dry, concrete quality of Kafka's writing to the novelist's perception that Prague German, a language with a "withered vocabulary and an incorrect syntax," could be pushed to "a new expressivity" and "new intensity" precisely *because* of its poverty and inflexibility.[30] They also discuss Prague German in relation to other nomadic language conditions such as those of Yiddish. Kafka and Akerman are modernist artists with an acute sense of their Jewish heritage. One could find similarities between Akerman's minimalism and Kafka's asymbolic style, but Deleuze and Guattari's brilliant analysis of Kafka fulfills itself

mainly as a warning: is it possible to make a film that is charged with social and cultural echoes of its cultural and ethnic (modernist and Jewish) history, and yet that avoids projecting a stable, recognizable identity? Akerman's effort to avoid reterritorializing film, to avoid grounding its images in accepted systems of legibility and in a particular ethnic typicality, is the issue I want to discuss in relation to *Histoires d'Amérique* (American Stories/[English version entitled *Food, Family and Philosophy*], 1988), an ethnic serial portrait, and *D'Est* (1993), an ethnographic experimental documentary.

. In 1987, Akerman spoke of the idea of a film in which each character would tell a joke about his or her ethnic group while eating a typical ethnic dish.[31] With significant changes, this project became *Histoires d'Amérique*. The film condenses a particular moment in the Jewish journey from East to West into Akerman's characteristic modular format. In long-take tableaux, she stages clichéd images of Ashkenazi Jews frozen in an initial moment of secularization: their costumes and stories eclectically refer to the early period of immigration to America (1890s) and to the pogroms they escaped.

*Meetings with Anna* traces a filmmaker's journey in 1978, as Anna shows her work in Germany and returns to Paris. Similarly, from film to film within Akerman's own oeuvre, a route is sketched that runs from Eastern Europe to America. The stops between would include, in *Meetings with Anna*, the night of intimate confidences with her mother that Anna spends in a Brussels hotel; Brussels and Akerman's own Polish mother are likewise the "origin" of the letters to Akerman in *News from Home*, a film about her stay in New York in 1972. The itinerary in Akerman's oeuvre, populated by people with different accents, exposes a continuous process of adaptation, of new languages constantly and barely acquired—a process that is part of Jewish history. Akerman returns to this history as if on a linear track, an axis having at one of its ends Eastern Europe and Russia (her ancestral origin, historic and at the same time mythic) and at the other Ellis Island, the promised land of immigrants, New York.

Akerman's structured repetitions in narrative films such as *Meetings with Anna*, and in personal documentaries like *News from Home* and *D'Est*, echo the rhythm and affect of Jewish Eastern European tales, songs, and jokes but radically abstract them. For their whole duration the shots in these films may provide a concentrated scrutiny of a space, a landscape, a face, but they abstract these views by passing them through Akerman's particular form of minimalist accretion, her cumulative seriality. *Histoires d'Amérique*, though, directly presents the ethnic and historical background for Akerman's litanylike dialogues and minimalist series.

Jewish life in the Pale, in the shtetl, and in big urban centers such as Warsaw and New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, forms the core of the stories portrayed in *Histoires d'Amérique*. Akerman had actively pursued adapting Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Manor and the Estate*. That she was interested in this epic book, a form quite alien to her aesthetic, indicates that the novel's content—the story of a Jewish family in Poland at the turn of the century, and an exploration of the dilemmas of secularization in Poland and in America—is an important focus for her. Indeed Akerman has talked of how, in reading the book, she felt it talked about her and her family.[32]

The tales, jokes, and songs voiced in *Histoires* expose their own nature as quotations; one feels their sources beyond the performers' mouths. Presented as vignettes, a dark night surrounding the storyteller, the stories introduce a fourth dimension in Akerman's work: a different kind of time, a nonlinear temporal beyond, which each presence and storyteller evokes. In a deliberate distancing process, actors and actresses speak in a recitative tone. Their archetypal roles—the wandering Jew, the bride, the groom, the assimilated young man, etc.—weigh heavily in the film's attempt to make Eastern European Jewish culture breathe. Placed against the hazy background of the Williamsburg Bridge area, the anecdotes call to mind New York ghetto short stories such as Abraham Cahan's "The Imported Bridegroom," and "The Providential Match." And the fact that the performers are of Jewish or Eastern European origin, some of them having acted in the old Yiddish theaters of the Lower East Side (George Bartenieff, Judith Malina, Ezther Balynt, Roy Nathanson), literalizes the displacement of the temporal frame in which this immigration account is set.

*Histoires* starts with the paradigmatic image of immigrant arrival—an unsteady view of the Statue of Liberty on the horizon, seen from an approaching boat. This view reverses the last shot of *News from Home*, where a long tracking shot from a departing Staten Island Ferry lets us see a gradually oscillating Manhattan, in the film's first clearly subjective use of the camera. *News from Home* is an essay on the distance between the Old World and the New. It links and contrasts America and Europe through a soundtrack that interweaves and overlaps the urban sounds of Manhattan and the reading of letters from Akerman's mother in Brussels to Akerman in New York. That the last shot of *News from Home* reverses the first image in *Histoires* acknowledges that Akerman's personal trajectory—from Belgium to New York—is part of a migrant history. This characterless subjective long take from the ferry is moving: whereas the other scenes in *News from Home* have a fixed, mechanical quality, even those in which the camera has been propped on a moving car (an effect

The ferry shot in *News from Home* (1976). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

that ends up precluding the sense of a subjective gaze), the ferry scene evokes an adieu.

*Histoires* seems to invert this adieu, but one should keep in mind the mirage quality of the reversal. Here as in *News from Home*, distance is Akerman's modifier: the Manhattan skyline is presented almost as a mirage, light blue within blue. That New York doesn't seem to be a concrete place here—in fact a concrete place is never quite reached—characterizes this crossing as storytelling; time, not space, is its ground. As we watch these buildings floating in the frame, we hear, though barely, a whispered dialogue in Polish and a Jewish song played on a cello. The film is about memory; tradition is the moral core of this remembrance.

In voice-over, Akerman begins a cautionary tale about remembrance:

> A rabbi always passed through a village to get to a forest, and there, at the foot of a tree, and it was always the same tree, he began to pray and God heard him. His son also passed through the village but he did not know the tree or the forest, so he prayed under any old tree, and God heard him. His grandson did not know the tree or the forest, so he went and prayed in the village, and God heard him. His great-grandson did not know where the tree, nor the forest, nor the village

were, but he still knew the words of the prayer, he prayed . . . and God heard him. His great-great-grandson did not know where the tree, nor the forest, nor the village were, not even the words of the prayer, but he still knew the story and he told it to his children and God heard him.

The tale implies that the Hasid can do without traditional rituals in the sincerity of his reach for God. It also suggests that it is by repeating and naming forgotten places and things (the tree, the forest, the village, the prayer) that one renews one's contact with a religious past. Storytelling, then, is thematically and formally privileged, and Akerman's own act of storytelling in the film partakes in this form of surrogate prayer. Once one cannot literally repeat the ritual, cannot pray under that one tree, to list what was left behind becomes the next best alternative. In this context, Akerman's formal strategies of literalness and seriality are submitted as approaches with clear moral consequences.

Although the film's heavy-handed presentation suggests an overconcern with identity, Akerman's choice of Jewish jokes reveals interesting parallels with her own aesthetic methods. One typical Talmudic play on the interpretive process makes clear her interest in unbalancing signification by slight nuances in repetition:

> What is consistency? Today this way, tomorrow this way.
> What is inconsistency? Today *this* way, tomorrow *this* way.[33]

A characteristic joke structure in the film involves overinterpretation when a simpler reading would do. At other times, the motif of someone outsmarting someone takes the shape of a radical ellipsis:

> Hello Teitelbaum! Mendelbaum, drop dead. Why do you answer like that? I'll tell you. Suppose I answer to you politely. Then you'll ask me where I'm going. I'll tell you to the baths on Houston street. Then you'll tell me that the Avenue A steam baths are better and that a man who prefers Houston steam baths to the Avenue A steam baths must have a hole in his head. I'll holler that a man who prefers the . . . in Avenue A to the . . . in Houston Street must be completely crazy. Then you'll call me a schmuck. I'll say, "A schmuck?! Drop dead." So instead of going through all that hoohah I say "Drop dead" and that ends it. Goodbye.

I have discussed how Akerman's works hover between detailed record (absolute literalness) and abrupt ellipsis. The joke here depends on an over-

zealously reported speech. At the same time, the crucial bone of contention—the steam baths—is made obtrusively redundant, formally voiding the issue of difference: when Teitelbaum comes to the repetitions of the words "steam bath," he reduces the very difference in question to a sonorous beat.

Perhaps the key to what makes this the material of an Akerman film lies in the concluding story. Sitting on a stool, an old man tells the following anecdote:

> One day, in Moscow or Warsaw as you like, there's a man waiting on line in front of a butcher. He waits there, for hours. When his turn comes up he asks the butcher: I'd like to have a filet of beef. The butcher looks at him stupefied and says, no, we don't have that. Well then, I'd like the lamb cutlets. The butcher looks at him more and more shocked: we don't have lamb cutlets. Well then, veal cutlets. No, certainly not, we don't have veal cutlets. Maybe veal roast? But mister, why don't you ask me for something we do have? OK: give me simply the breast of duck. There isn't any. And the man leaves. The butcher says, "What a fool. But how he remembers!"

Like so many of Akerman's monologues, this mundane encounter involves a long list. The joke operates within Akerman's characteristic absurd nominalism: her resistance to abbreviation, and to the logical subsumption of alternatives within an encompassing category, appears here in the customer's inability simply to ask what kind of meat is available. The butcher's final remark explicitly recognizes the contest between two overlapping yet mutually exclusive systems of thought. To memorize and recite a list shows a lack of adaptability, but the very feat of remembering is somehow impressive. In a scholarly culture like that of the Jews, the process of remembering is of capital importance. As in a religious chant, each element or event needs to be remembered and named. Yet this very remembrance makes one blind to changes under one's very nose.

The question Akerman asks in this joke seems to be the same one that moved her to make a film on Jewish identity: presenting listing as a form of ritual in the face of change, she is staging the passage from traditional to secular existence. The question to be asked of *Histoires* is how burdened the representation becomes once Akerman's filial, ethnic, and religious obligations come to the fore. "My story," says Akerman at the end of the rabbi's tale of praying under the tree, "is full of holes, and I don't even have a kid." Several of the stories in *Histoires* recount the guilt of leaving religion and tradition behind. Repeating familiar jokes becomes Akerman's

own ritualistic gesture—a form of surrogate childbearing, of maintaining tradition.[34]

Staging Akerman's familiarity with Jewish culture, *Histoires* reproduces identity too faithfully to leave any space for the sense of estrangement that, in oblique ways, commands her filmic vision of the two main poles of her journey: the Poland, East Germany, and Moscow recorded in *D'Est,* and the personal, singular New York shown in *News from Home.* Within the East-West axis of Akerman's voyage, these films are related beyond their similar hypnotic rhythm and ethnographic quality. They explore new territory and, displaying the best qualities of the ethnographic sensibility, create an unfamiliar image.

*D'Est* is one of the results of a project for a multimedia installation focusing on the coming together of the European community.[35] While "Akerman was immediately attracted to the project . . . she proposed to look at what was left out of this union as well, and at the concomitant rise of nationalism and anti-Semitism."[36] Kathy Halbreich and Bruce Jenkins point out Akerman's prescience in suggesting these themes before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[37] More than any of Akerman's essayistic documentaries, *D'Est* raises issues concerning the role of ethnographic film, questioning the subjective imprint of a gaze on images of a distant or threatened reality.[38] A formally stringent work, *D'Est* uses fixed shots or long tracking shots "to make a big trip across East Europe while there is still time." Her declared interest was to "film . . . all these countries that lived a common history after the war, that are marked by this history in the very folds of the earth, and whose roads now diverge."[39]

As other statements of Akerman's reveal, she was also quite aware of a parallel image track she was tapping into. Her journey through today's Eastern Europe doesn't document the region as such, though documentation is one of the film's effects. Her referent is clear: "Our imaginary is charged with East Europe. At each face I felt a history . . . the camps, Stalin, denunciation." As in a "primitive scene," she notes that "it is always the same thing that reveals itself": "old images" "barely covered by lighter and even radiant images," images of "evacuation, of marches in the snow with packages toward an unknown place, faces and bodies placed one besides the other." "The film," says Akerman, "will let one perceive something of this disoriented world, with that impression of a postwar era in which each lived day seems like a victory."[40]

A ritual in the form of a catalogue, the film, which took off only in 1992, can be said to have been " 'written' in the aftermath of impressions, memo-

ries and emotions Akerman brought back from a journey she had taken [in 1990] to prepare for a film about the poet Anna Akhmatova."[41] And it is the poet's "Requiem: 1935–1940," that colors the film's implicit historicity:

> In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there): "Can you describe this?" And I said: "I can." Then something like a smile passed fleetingly what had once been her face.[42]

Akhmatova's "this" is somehow included within Akerman's description, the filmmaker's "this" of a '90s East also undergoing historical and political change. About this change there are no explicit questions asked. But Akerman does ask, through her pointed process of layering, what kind of movement, or better what kind of paralysis, informs this landscape's wintery rhythms.

Starting with the end of summer in East Germany, *D'Est* moves across fields, roads, and interiors to end, abruptly, in deep Moscow winter. A sound film without speakers or voice-over, *D'Est* puts the burden of providing information on images, music, and diegetic sound. Where one is, who these people are, remain to varying degrees opaque. When Akerman shows people in lines or crowds, she limits their identities to the cinematic index they produce—their unique humanlike traits, shaped by light and shadow. When she enters someone's apartment, she records the inhabitant's absorption in an everyday task or pleasure—cutting salami, playing records or the piano—as in genre painting. This circumstantial, not necessarily typical moment is all that will link that woman or man to a certain social function. Elsewhere Akerman provides more conventional portraits: the person poses as if for a photograph, sitting by a table, a TV, or a kitchen sink.

Akerman also uses exterior shots to suggest the particulars of social place. A group walks down an icy road; one wonders where they are going. People wait outdoors for a bus, all of them wrapped in similar fur hats and overcoats; through slow tracking shots, with the camera mounted on a *zil,* a bureaucrat's heavy car, Akerman momentarily dispels their uniformity, probing their faces as the very index of a resistance to anonymity. *D'Est* critiques the Western perception of Eastern Europe's supposedly homogenous mass societies. To discover signs of difference among the members of

Women pick potatoes and face the camera in *D'Est* (1993). Still, courtesy of Walker Art Center, from the exhibit, *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est,* June 18–August 27, 1995.

a sociopolitical system with a more restricted consumer grid becomes an exercise as arduous as finding a difference among the fields and roads that most of the film shows covered by snow. Akerman wrote during shooting, "I will show faces that . . . express something still untouched and often the opposite of that uniformity that at times strikes you in the movement of crowds. . . . Without romanticizing, I would say these are countenances that are not ruined; that offer and give themselves as they are, and erase, for an instant, the feeling of loss, of a world at the edge of an abyss, a feeling that grabs you when you cross the East, as I just did."[43]

The pace of *D'Est's* images is entrancing, and disallows an easy or super-ficial recognition. Though the spectator is curious about the inhabitants of these rural and urban landscapes, no sequence of shots receives an estab-lishing frame. As in *News from Home,* the rhythm of the shots and tracking movements is answered, from within the image, as people gaze at the camera. In a field, Akerman boldly places the camera facing some women picking potatoes and gradually moving toward the camera. The camera's presence is felt; the women's furtive glances as they continue with their work designates its gaze, and ours, as the foreigner's. Our foreigner's curi-

osity recalls other invasive gazes—that of the ethnographer, say, or the photographer, or the journalist. It is not a touristic curiosity, though, for the result of its scrutiny is a very specific encounter. A moment of mutual curiosity is registered. In the train station the camera seems to follow a paraplegic; after he disappears in the throng, the camera turns in successive 360-degree pans to record a human movement that is itself entrancing in its rapidly changing design and focus of interest.

Moving east, progressively recording a snowclad landscape, *D'Est* more than any of Akerman's films is a series with no telos. The final shot, of an empty train station, is abrupt but creates no closure. As in *News from Home,* its tension is the tension between the camera's mechanical gaze and the human passersby it catches. But in *D'Est* the landscape itself has a significance that is absent from the New York images in *News from Home.* The facts of Eastern Europe's shifting geography were too fresh at the moment of the film's making for this history not to register as History, and for the film not to refer one back to other histories. Its underlying motif, in fact, might be a gaze at the traces of a history shared by Akerman's parents, to test the familiarity the filmmaker felt with Eastern Europe's and Russia's clothes and food when she first traveled there. Her sense of the forced movement of crowds—her attention to the ways people gather in stations, or in lines—is testimony to a post–World War II sensitivity.

The real eloquence of this almost silent document, however, lies in its ways of provoking the spectator to try to distinguish in its varied physiognomies a landscape and a history that might brush against the grain of an image of Eastern Europe that has been simplified for Western consumption. Akerman's ability to let personal histories briefly flash from within an imagistic mass so pregnant with historical valence attests to the ways her attention is tuned to difference.

Akerman's long takes have been likened to blocks—distinct, separate scenes that follow a linear progression, like the compartments of a train. This structure is even more evident in films that depict some kind of journey. Typically, Akerman breaks the film into units: train or subway cars (*Meetings with Anna, News from Home*), the enactment of jokes or anecdotes (*Histoires d'Amérique*), placement in Eastern Germany or Poland and Russia (*D'Est*). She constructs a cinematic correlate of geography, a geography that moves in time just as it has moved with history. This geography is traversed by a personal and political history, alternate energies that resist the track of a linear progression. In *D'Est,* for example, this resistance reverberates against the limits of the contemporary myth of Eastern Europe. Akerman's personal ethnography is split between the

present that it records—the surprising interest of each person and face—and this other image, a cliché of our post-Holocaust sensibility. To these echoes from the East Akerman responds with small-scale moments of individuation, ripples of sound. After a woman's moving performance of a cello solo, one is moved further by the audience's appreciation: first a woman, then a man, and then yet another man approach the stage to hand the musician a bouquet of roses.

Akerman's personal history—that of a filmmaker and European Jew looking out to New York as well as back to Eastern Europe—is dramatized in some of her films as a gliding gaze that encounters and checks the clichés of history. Heinrich's monologue in *Meetings with Anna,* on what happened to him after the war, exemplifies Akerman's way of telegraphing history and a post-Holocaust consciousness: Anna's semiattention to Heinrich's speech displaces onto the audience the demand that the spectator share his knowledge. In *D'Est,* which has no recourse to fiction, it is the filmmaker's own glance that mediates the cliché (an image known before it is seen) and creates the possibility of seeing something else. Akerman avoids constructing her images as time stopped. Unlike most ethnographic film, her images are not part of the kind of rescue project that justifies the filmmaker's presence as the righteous recorder of a threatened reality. Although Akerman has said that in making *D'Est* she was moved by the sense of rapid social change, the film that resulted does not freeze any reality as myth. Rather, *D'Est* both acknowledges the mythical pull of history and persists, in a minor key, to construct alternate images.

# TO CONCLUDE

## It Is Time

*Sloth: Portrait of a Lazy Woman* (1986), is Akerman's episode for *Seven Women Seven Sins,* an omnibus film of 1988 by a group of women directors. It addresses the sin of sloth, of playing with time, Akerman's chosen vice. In its unusual sloppiness, she has said, the film exposes her own laziness: it feels as if she'd made it easily in a single afternoon. Even more starkly than her feature work, this bare-bones quality reveals Akerman's concern with duration.

In "Sloth" the experience of time passing and being wasted, measuring things left undone, is interpolated by acute compressions. As the episode starts, Akerman is lying in bed. She looks at the clock and says she'll get up in a minute; we watch with her as the minute passes by. "To make a film . . . you have to get dressed . . . but if you don't get undressed—you don't have to get dressed. At least that's a gain!" she says, throwing off the bed covers to show she's clothed and ready. Laziness, allowing time to slip by—Akerman compensates for these very quotidian procrastinations by clever shortcuts: gathering her pills for the day, for example, she saves time by dropping them all in a glass of water and drinking them *at once.*

In discussing the distinctive traits and effects of Akerman's minimal/ hyperrealist style, I have often found myself describing a process of inconclusiveness and ambivalence. In Akerman's work, meaning emerges in fits and starts, and is often presented under dual, conflicting banners. Images flicker between the literal and the figurative register; sentences

As in *Night and Day* (1991), she cannot choose either boyfriend in *Toute une Nuit* (1981). Frame enlargement, print courtesy of World Artists Release.

waver indeterminately between the loud cliché and the earnest comment. This aesthetic strategy seems to suggest a purposeful allegory of reading.

The *at once* of taking the pills is the urgent, assertive image for the lack of priority that informs both Akerman's formal strategies and the duality of several of her characters' behavior. In all her films and videos, the cumulative principle animating the figures *at once, both,* and *and, and, and . . .* works as an active instability undermining the stakes involved in choice. Irresolvable sequencing and dualistic structuring spill from the films' form into their content. *Night and Day* (1991), for example, a film in a light mode that is so revealing of Akerman's major concerns, suggests how all of her work leans on the notions of an ordered time and a natural cycle only to pervert them. The film makes a theme of the lack of hierarchy that informs Akerman's seriality (an excess that in the films of the mid '80s figures most obviously in her adoption of the musical and of singing). When Julie, in *Night and Day,* is offered a choice between tea and coffee, she asks for both—a logical answer, since she wants both night and day, both Jack and Joseph.

This idea of all or nothing is quite understandable in the realm of romance. In other films, however, the logic it provides is rather peculiar. Akerman's dialogue, for example, often contains two disparate, contradictory ideas that should contradict and void each other, yet don't. What

introduces these incongruities is not the kind of suggestion of a subjective point of view that comes, for example, with a character's voice-over; the force of Akerman's work lies in quite concrete disparities—when, say, lines of dialogue are voiced in a row, yet don't quite follow from one another. When Julie talks to Joseph, she discusses her high heels in the same breath as her feelings. Each is an equal term in her explanations of the dangers of falling asleep and of losing her balance.

In Akerman's work, estrangement is often provoked by the formal collapse of two different registers or orders that are juxtaposed (in her hyperrealism) or that segue one from the other despite their categorical incompatibility (in her minimalist seriality). One source of her affinity for comedy is precisely her performance of a filmic bluff—a smooth surface over a warped reality, a detailed description where none is needed, an equation of discordant realities, an indiscrimination among registers and categories. Language's layered referentiality, the possibility of metalanguage, is crucial to establishing this at times subtle indistinction. In *Meetings with Anna,* Anna and Heinrich are in a city but not in a clearly defined urban center. Anna asks if they are in the suburbs; when Heinrich says no, she replies, "Good, I don't like suburbs." Here as in other Akerman films, language, the reality of naming and of words, is a safeguard against a concrete aversion.

Examples abound in which language and mise-en-scène displace the content of an action, sliding a gesture into its opposite. Jeanne Dielman smoothes her skirt as she stands up to pick up the scissors and kill her john. In *The Eighties,* Aurore starts by serving ice cream efficiently but ends by sticking the ice cream scoop randomly in the containers, in a distracted simulation of her working gesture. In *The Man with the Suitcase,* we hear the sound of typing, slightly out of sync, as Akerman is about to start typing herself. Her unwanted guest has started to type ahead of her. Akerman's work consistently places deceptively similar realities in apposition to suggest that they are not quite the same. Or an accretion of indexical references somehow suggests something not quite then and there.

These categorical ambiguities often have larger consequences than the fact that a suburb, for instance, is not really pinned down by the word "suburb." One of Akerman's '90s films, *Le Déménagement* (Moving in, 1992), explores this structuring linguistic duality with the alogic of Beckett (an echo in many of her scripts): Akerman is writing about the difficulty of choice. After walking the length and width of his new apartment from wall to wall—measuring twice, each time with different results—an un-

named character (Sammy Frey) tells us about last summer, when his equally passionate interest in three of his young neighbors resulted in an impasse: it was impossible for him to choose between each of the particular delights available to him.

> Juliette, Beatrice, Elisabeth—I loved all three with an immense love. . . . Elisabeth was from Toulouse, Beatrice was from Toulouse, Juliette was from Toulouse, and none had a dog. Each had a room. Elisabeth had a room, Juliette had a room, Beatrice had a room. None had a dog. There was a strong concentration of Toulousians in an apartment in Paris.

Then, after describing a photograph he has taken of Juliette and her father, he sighs,

> After the photo I should have asked for Juliette's hand. But no, that of Beatrice was sweeter, and then that day when Elisabeth said to me, "Après vous monsieur [After you sir]," it was so mature, she didn't bow, but . . . imagine living every morning in this fantastic politeness—"Après vous monsieur." Beatrice I met in the supermarket and she asked if I didn't notice how the temperature inside and outside was different. And I agreed. To live all your life with someone with whom you agree over small things. I compared the "Après vous monsieur" with "Don't you think that the temperature inside/outside, etc.," and I was perplexed. One equaled the other. . . . the question became more complex when I met Juliette at the post office. She didn't say anything but her face was lit.

He punctuates his thoughts about each of the women with other considerations: "A man passed by in the street . . . and he said: "I went to the sea last week." "What luck you had," replied the other. I *did not* agree. I sincerely pitied that man. I thought 'last week' is not 'tomorrow,' and 'tomorrow' is necessarily better than 'last week.'" The story gets more piquant when the girls sleep over in his room while he politely spends the night on the living room floor. They decide he needs a new bed, and a discussion ensues of the mattress, the springs, the frame; but the expected closure—a sexual or romantic denouement—dissolves. Each woman gets married, but to someone else, and our hero sadly reminisces, his verbal and logical conundrums replaying an entire Rohmerian comedy of morals in monologue form.

The character's fascination with these women is revealed in all its lack of specificity. By making the women permutations of an ideal, Akerman

discloses the contours of a male discourse in which interchangeability spells romance. But more is at stake here than a good-humored twist on masculine romanticism: the monologues reveal a man torn not only among three young students of the human sciences but among the dizzying possibilities of referentiality. At one point he compares the weight of a description to the value of a saying; he equates two different sorts of platitude, and because he seems not to question the triteness of either, the spectator can only agree.

The detached quality of the linguistic references in *Le Déménagement,* their seeming at once significant and banal, recalls the cliché and its evocation of meanings that seem somehow out of place.[1] Once a striking and original figure of speech, the cliché has lost its power. The quotation marks or brackets in which Frey sets Juliette's, Beatrice's, and Elisabeth's gestures and phrases have the same kind of effect. Emphasizing the impossibility of choice, he qualifies the women's "baffling" uniqueness; describing the particularity of their gestures and speech, he voids it. Structurally, each equals the other. This equivalence not only confuses the identities of the three women, it leads to a sort of paralysis of signification. The certainty of the platitude is linked to stasis. Frey explicitly promises stability through coded behavior and banal phrases: "Imagine being in agreement every day about the small things in life." Mobilized by Akerman's permutations, the cliché is fixed in its apparent logical irrefutability.

The juggling of phrases as props suggests a clever argument about the arbitrariness of reference, but this reflexive game seems somehow alien to Akerman. In fact Frey's ultimate solitude after so much indecision adds a tinge of pathos to the notion of playing with signifiers; his confusions among different referential procedures somehow doom his permutational logic. Akerman's referential circularity spells loneliness for him. The anti-hierarchical structure and thematics of *Le Déménagement,* so promising on a deconstructive narrative level, seem to imply a moral: the impossibility of choosing becomes a burden with very real consequences.

This relative moralism is uncharacteristic of Akerman and needs to be accounted for. Something similar is found in *Night and Day,* where Julie, unable to sustain the equivalence between two lovers, resolutely steps out into the street, throws her high heels into a garbage can, and walks toward the camera in a long traveling shot, her smile suggesting a liberation from the impossible balancing act of her double affair. Julie's decisiveness, her reoccupation of her split desire, seems to reflect an ultimately healthy ambition to pursue her route alone; the Frey character's loneliness, on the other hand, seems deserved, because "caused" by his male logic. In
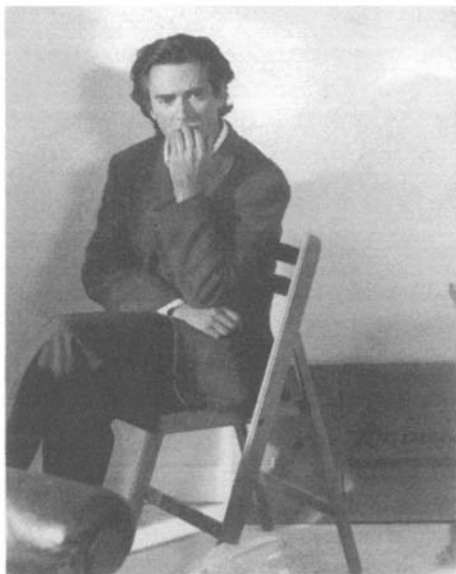
The impossible choice, Sammy Frey in *Le Déménagement* (1992). Still, courtesy of the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

both cases, however, psychology threatens to take over the narrative's irresolution—a development alien to the more usual oscillatory movement of Akerman's aesthetic. That aesthetic has a characteristic pathology: in *Jeanne Dielman* and in *Je tu il elle,* for example, it is through an extended *sympathy with,* or a *mimicry of,* a character's eccentricity that Akerman redirects the issues from the psychological to the social and collective realms. How are we to take then, *Le Déménagement*'s distance, the fact that it finally frames its character's alogic?

Frey's monologues can be seen as a special form of naïveté, a *pose* or *mimicry* of innocence or simplicity that constitutes a form of irony between the verbal and the dramatic. Verbal irony is a form of speech in which one meaning is stated while a different, often antithetical meaning is intended; dramatic irony is a plot device in which the protagonist behaves inappropriately or unwisely and the spectators know more than the protagonist, observing a contrast between what the protagonist understands about his acts and what the text demonstrates about them.[2] Falling between verbal and dramatic irony, *Le Déménagement* presents Akerman's text in a dessicated cinematic shape: could the man's monologue be as well served onstage? Or as part of a book? Not quite—the weight of Akerman's writings and dialogue-qua-monologues is, we have seen, intrinsically related to its performance, to her oblique displacements of the

agencies of narration. Yet the fact that in *Le Déménagement* it is the text that almost single-handedly carries the burden of her categorical oscillations is crucial.

As Frey sits in a chair, facing the spectator, the camera tracks in on him. This is the sum of the cinematic devices of *Le Déménagement*. Made for a TV series entitled *Monologues,* the film has a theatrical setting that reduces the dialogue-qua-monologue strategies of films like *Meetings with Anna* and *Jeanne Dielman* to bare antinaturalistic effects. *Le Déménagement* plays mostly with words, and because the arbitrariness of the verbal sign makes it less malleable than the photographic image, the film seems to be clearly making a case against the illusions of referentiality. The theatricality of Frey's frontal confessions is another sign of anti-illusionism— yet this theatricality ultimately becomes the stage for a moral condemnation of the character. Instead of arguing for the arbitrariness of signs, the mise-en-scène of Frey's solitude creates a strangely naturalizing twist. Given the ambivalence of the film's scene, we wonder whether this gesture toward reflexivity is another bluff, another tactical maneuver from a filmmaker who often plays by simulation. But the character's naive confusion of the three women fits in with Akerman's habitual desire for referential instability and is finally unco-optable by her knowing authorial nod here.

One can suggest, in fact that even in Akerman's most coherent simulations (*Jeanne Dielman, Je tu il elle*), the consistency between the films' cinematic structures and their characters' pathologies at some point breaks down and shows as fissure. Conversely, one can add that it is Akerman's formal liminality—her delay in framing eccentricity, in distinguishing subject from object, texture from theme—that allows for the greatest gains in active spectatorship. The issue for Akerman, as for other filmmakers after Godard, remains that of the reflexive strength of mimicry. Is her double-layered mimesis a particular form of reflexivity, or are we moving into a different representational dimension? The most conspicuous trait of Akerman's aesthetic is the categorical blur it promotes. Her antihierarchical effects depend on a perverse notion of the copy, one that even ventures into making actual references. These effects are also, and significantly, contingent on a slowing down of tempo, a different perceptual temporality, and an acute detour from the open-endedness common in European art films of the '60s.

Akerman's repeated references to the figure of humming are illuminating in regard to her characteristic lack of hierarchy in structure and texture. In *Saute ma ville,* the character played by Akerman energetically, and almost vengefully, hums a lively Bach-like tune while combining oppos-

ing activities in single gestures: she cleans *and* dirties the kitchen floor, shines her shoes *and* brushes her legs black with shoe polish, before finally blowing herself up. Akerman has talked about seeing a women's demonstration in which the demonstrators, instead of screaming and raising their fists, joined in a hum. For Akerman, this alternative language opened a possibility of saying something different, and of asserting gender as difference. Describing the making of *D'Est,* she has said that the only way to film that reality was to proceed by a form of stuttering, a slow, hesitant approach. Her repeated references to detours from content-based communication define her form of expressivity as straddling the logic of order and the intensity of chaos or formlessness.

Discussing what he calls Akerman's "impossible melodrama," Eric de Kuyper asks, "Should one consider boredom a passion?" His answer makes clear the nature of Akerman's neither nor aesthetic: the irresolvable sequence of her images suggests "not a chaotic, undecisive, gasping discourse, but quite on the contrary a *melopée* [a long recitative chant], a slow and diffuse boredom, a white neutrality."[3] This choice of diffuse sameness perfectly describes the droning and humming in Akerman's films, the oscillating machinery of her aesthetic. That from this background of continuous, purposeful indeterminacy she can create sudden pockets of drama, or a perceptual difference, attests to the relative patience, as well as the perversity, of her particular branch of duration.

In *Saute ma Ville,* Akerman's humming is in ironic concert with a frenzy of action that cannot distinguish order from chaos. Yet the songs she uses aren't amorphous; they are well-known, and they bring with them the layered dimension of their popularity. When a song's lyrics are heard in an Akerman film, it is always a corny love song, or else a classical musical cliché, like the "Für Elise" heard over the radio in *Jeanne Dielman.*[4] Even the films' cheerful original songs, with lyrics by Akerman, appeal to what Theodor Adorno disparagingly called the "emotional listener."[5] Akerman's songs are the lighter side of a darker, more powerful drive. Conjured up against the dread of stasis that haunts the films, these musical clichés (like the platitudes in *Meetings with Anna*) draw their energy from the many times they have been and will be hummed. Their rhythmic quality and their history reflect Akerman's interest in repetition. One might say, in fact, that she vanquishes sameness and repetition (boredom in Akerman's work being a clear correlate of the death drive) by speeding up and rhythmically modulating repetitive elements.

While the underlying sense pervading Akerman's films is one of cyclical homeostasis, her defiance of telos and of logical certainty is radical and at

times clearly upbeat. We need, then, to find whatever does not quite repeat in her repetitions. Akerman is drawn to those strategies and elements that halt and defer. Extended duration and clichés are blockers of meaning; they promote a different form of sensibility, one tuned to the very corporeality of filmic language. This corporeal dimension lies in the spectator's share in the image's duration, or in his or her exfoliation of the cliché's semantic history. If logical meaning is corroded, other meanings subsist in layered or hybrid forms—in hyperrealist images, in singing and humming, in pregnant images or clichés. These forms suggest a dense stratification, but its strata resist hierarchical determination. In Akerman's films meaning is nomadic.

In a strategy akin to that of experimental filmmakers, Leslie Thornton (in her cycle *Peggy and Fred in Hell,* 1984–94) and Peggy Ahwesh (in *Ode to a New Pre History,* 1984–87; *Martina's Playhouse,* 1989; and *Scary Movie,* 1993), who use children's immediate mimicry of cultural and social norms to register a societal indigestion,[6] Akerman operates through a second-degree cinematic naïveté, a densely layered mimicry.[7] In both her fictional and her documentary films, her minimal hyperrealism forces images and characters to add their immediate denotative function to cultural and aesthetic scenarios, enforcing their reciprocal instability. Instead of the filmic wink directed at the spectator, and above the character's heads and bodies (as in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*), Akerman suggests a corporeal cinema whose complicity with its detail-saturated settings, and with the gestures of its eccentric characters, is so fierce as to inscribe, along with the halted flow of storytelling, the possibility of alternate logics. Expressive despite its minor key, Akerman makes signification oscillate and alternate in phases. Despite their constant motion, however, the phasing is clear.

## FILMOGRAPHY

*Saute ma ville* (Blow up my town), 1968, 35mm, black and white, 13 minutes
*L'Enfant aimé ou Je joue à être une femme mariée* (The beloved child or I play at being a married woman), 1971, 16mm, black and white, 35 minutes
*Hotel Monterey*, 1972, 16mm, color, 65 minutes (silent)
*La Chambre 1* (The room 1), 1972, 16mm, color, 11 minutes (sound)
*La Chambre 2* (The room 2), 1972, 16mm, color, 7 minutes (silent)
*Le 15/8*, 1973, 16mm, black and white, 42 minutes, codirected with Samy Szlingerbaum
*Hanging Out Yonkers 1973*, 1973, 16mm, color, 90 minutes (unfinished)
*Je tu il elle* (I you he she) 1974, 35mm, black and white, 90 minutes
*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, 1975, 35mm, color, 200 minutes
*News from Home*, 1976, 16mm, color, 85 minutes
*Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (Meetings with Anna), 1978, 35mm, color, 127 minutes
*Dis-moi* (Tell me), 1980, 16mm, color, 45 minutes
*Toute une nuit* (All night long) 1982, 35mm, color, 89 minutes
*Les Années 80* (The eighties), 1983, video/35mm, color, 82 minutes
*Un Jour Pina m'a demandé* (One day Pina asked me), 1983, 16mm, color, 57 minutes
*L'Homme à la valise* (The man with the suitcase), 1983, 16mm, color, 60 minutes
*J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (I'm hungry, I'm cold), 1984, 35mm, black and white, 12 minutes
*Family Business: Chantal Akerman Speaks about Film*, 1984, 16mm, color, 18 minutes
*New York, New York bis*, 1984, 35mm, black and white, 8 minutes (lost)
*Lettre de cinéaste* (A Filmmaker's Letter), 1984, 16mm, color, 8 minutes
*Golden Eighties* (aka *Window Shopping*), 1985, 35mm, color, 96 minutes

*La Paresse* (Sloth), 1986, 35mm, color, 14 minutes

*Le Marteau* (The hammer), 1986, video, color, 4 minutes

*Letters Home,* 1986, video, color, 100 minutes

*Mallet-Stevens,* 1986, video, color, 7 minutes

*Histoires d'Amérique* (American stories/*Food, Family and Philosophy*), 1988, 35mm, color, 92 minutes

*Les Trois dernières sonates de Franz Schubert* (Franz Schubert's last three sonatas), 1989, video, color, 49 minutes

*Trois strophes sur le nom de Sacher* ("Three stanzas on the name Sacher, by Henri Dutilleux), 1989, video, color, 12 minutes

*Nuit et Jour* (Night and day), 1991, 35mm, color, 90 minutes

*Le Déménagement* (Moving in), 1992, 35mm, black and white, 42 minutes

*Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60, à Bruxelles* (Portrait of a young girl from the late sixties in Brussels), 1993, 35mm, color, 60 minutes

*D'Est* (From the East), 1993, 35mm, color, 107 minutes

# NOTES

### Chantal Akerman's Films: The Politics of the Singular

1   See Chantal Akerman quoted in "Entretien avec Françoise Maupin," *Image et Son* 334 (December 1978), 103. Richard Kwietniowski discusses Akerman's use of symmetry in "Separations: Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976) and *Toute une nuit* (1982)," *Movie* 34/35 (Winter 1990).

2   See Marie Claude Treillou, "La Vie, Il Faut la Mettre en Scène," *Cinema* 76. 206 (February 1976), 32.

3   Gary Indiana, "Getting Ready for *The Golden Eighties:* A Conversation with Chantal Akerman," *Artforum* 21.10 (Summer 1983), 61.

4   Akerman originally wanted to make a feature film. See "Getting Ready for *The Golden Eighties,*" 57. She mentions that *Saute ma Ville* was kept in a laboratory for two years. When trying to pay her debt to the lab she asked if there was any chance of selling it somewhere, and the lab director suggested among others Flemish TV. It took the film for the TV series *L'autre Cinéma.* After an excellent review Akerman called one of the critics to ask about other chances for production. He suggested the Ministery of French Culture, where she sent a project about a girl who poisons her parents. The project was refused, and meanwhile Akerman watched many films and borrowed money to make a second film, *L'Enfant Aimé,* which she claims is weak, the result of badly absorbed knowledge. Akerman then went to New York, where she felt liberated after watching American experimental films and made *Hotel Monterey.* See Akerman, "Entretien avec Chantal Akerman," in Danièle Dubroux, Thérèse Giraud, and Louis Skorecki, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 278 (July 1977), 40.

5   Akerman, quoted in Corinne Squire, "*Toute une Heure:* Corinne Squire Talks to Chantal Akerman," *Screen* 25.6 (November–December 1984), 68.

6    See Marsha Kinder, "Reflections on *Jeanne Dielman*," *Film Quarterly* 30.4 (Summer 1977), 2.

7    Akerman, "*Le Manoir—Le Domaine*," in *Chantal Akerman*, Cahier 1, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas (Brussels: Atelier des Arts, 1982), 144. My translation.

8    Akerman, quoted in Treillou, 90.

9    See Laura Mulvey, "Film, Feminism, and the Avant-Garde," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 117.

10    In the feminist section of Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), a number of articles deal extensively with *Jeanne Dielman:* Claire Johnston's "Toward a Feminist Film Practice: Some Theses"; Jayne Loader's "*Jeanne Dielman:* Death in Installments"; and B. Ruby Rich's "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism." See also Rich, "Chantal Akerman's Meta Cinema," and J. Hoberman, "*Jeanne Dielman:* Woman's Work," *Village Voice* (29 March 1983); Janet Bergstrom, "*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,* by Chantal Akerman," *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory* 2 (Fall 1977); Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17 (Summer 1981); Brenda Longfellow, "Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13.1–2 (1989); Kinder, "Reflections on *Jeanne Dielman*"; Ruth Perlmutter, "Feminine Absence: A Political Aesthetic in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,*" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 4.2 (Spring 1979), "Visible Narrative, Visible Woman," *Millenium Film Journal* 6 (Spring 1980), and "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," in *New German Critique* 13 (1978) which was an instrumental article in discussing Akerman's work. Books on feminism and cinema invariably discuss Akerman's work: Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1982), Teresa de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), and Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) are examples.

11    See Mary Jo Lakeland, "The Color of *Jeanne Dielman*," *Camera Obscura* 3/4 (1979): 216–17. Lakeland doesn't emphasize the Flemish tradition in Akerman's use of certain colors, and the relation of this tradition to her depiction of the mundane, but discusses how the film's color scheme demarcates the enclosure of Jeanne's world.

12    In his essay "*Jeanne Dielman:* Cinematic Interrogation and 'Amplification,'" *Millenium Film Journal* 22 (Winter/Spring 1989–90), Ben Singer exhaustively analyzes *Jeanne Dielman*'s formal system and its "amplification" of quattrocento perspective. Akerman's use of classical linear perspective is one reason *Jeanne Dielman* has been absorbed in the canon of the European art film.

13    A relevant predecessor to Akerman's depiction of a housewife's mundane activities is Helmuth Costard's *The Oppression of Woman is Primarily Evident in the Behavior of Women Themselves* (1969). This film's strategy of defamiliarization of a woman's routine is to have a man perform the household tasks. The descriptions provided by Jan Dawson and by Ann Harris (in her in-depth study of Costard's work) relate the ways in which the film departs from *Jeanne Diel-*

*man* in its use of a handheld verité-style camera. Most important is the similar anti-essentialist impulse present in both films. See Jan Dawson, ed., *The Films of Helmuth Costard* (London: Riverside Studios, 1979), and Ann Harris, "Taking Time Seriously: Technology, Politics and Filmmaking Practice in the films of Helmuth Costard" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1993).

14    In *Jeanne Dielman,* Akerman's camera follows the routine of Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig), a widow who looks after her adolescent son and supports herself by working as a prostitute once each afternoon, for three days. The compass of her world is shown as circumscribed by the immediate demands of her household. Something happens on the second day, however, that we only learn about through its residual effects: a general breakdown of order. Then, in the first sex scene Akerman actually shows, in a medium distance shot, Jeanne has an orgasm. As she is dressing she leaves the bed, picks up a pair of scissors, and kills her client. After the murder we watch her sitting at the dinner table, motionless.

15    See my discussion in chapter 3.

16    In an interview for program notes for the Public Theater, New York, Dan Yakir asks Akerman if Jeanne finally reaches this kind of awareness. Akerman replies, "I don't know about her psyche. The problem in the film is not her: it is her relating to me and you. So the awareness is in you, not her. She doesn't exist." Akerman, quoted in Yakir, "An Interview with Akerman," 2.

17    Perlmutter, "Visible Narrative, Visible Woman," 22. Although this article is full of reductive psychoanalytic and feminist jargon, Perlmutter advances an interesting interpretation of Akerman's aesthetics in a comparison with Peter Handke's film *The Left Handed Woman.*

18    Bergstrom, 116.

19    Fine descriptions of Akerman's aesthetics can be found in Rich's and Hoberman's *Village Voice* articles, Bergstrom's essay, Kinder's article, and Annette Kuhn's references in her book. Other useful readings include Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole;* the care Mayne takes to avoid establishing a homology between detailed textual analysis and psychoanalytic constructs is outstanding. Doane's "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body" and Perlmutter's description of Akerman's "undernarrative" in "Visible Narrative, Visible Woman" are especially valuable.

20    Kuhn, 174.

21    Daniel Dayan's "The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1974), 22–31. Jean Pierre Oudart's "Cinema and Suture," and Stephen Heath's "Notes on Suture" are part of a debate on the potential application of Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)." These three articles, published in *Screen* 18:4 (Winter 1977/78), define not only the relevance of the subject but the pervasiveness of the preoccupation with classical cinema as a model. Although Oudart discusses Robert Bresson and Heath brings in Akerman's *News from Home* to suggest alternatives to that model, these works end up as counterexamples in a predetermined system. Joan Copjec's, "Apparatus and Umbra: For a Feminist Critique of the Apparatus" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1986), develops an important critique of all applications of the concept of suture.

22   Johnston, "Feminist Film Practice," 326.

23   Bergstrom, "*Jeanne Dielman*," 117.

24   See Rich, "Feminist Film Criticism," 346–47.

25   Rich, 346.

26   Rich, 346. Employing the precarious all-encompassing term "correspondence films," Rich fails to account for the specificity of the films she discusses. Grouping filmmakers as different as Akerman, Yvonne Rainer, Peter Wollen, and Laura Mulvey, her term refers to films "investigating correspondences, i.e., between emotion and objectivity, narrative and deconstruction, art and ideology. Thus *Jeanne Dielman* is a film of correspondence in its exploration of the bonds between housework and madness, prostitution and heterosexuality, epic and dramatic temporality" (Rich, 354).

27   Rich, 348.

28   In relation to the second part of *Je tu il elle*, for instance, Akerman refers explicitly to an ethnological regard turned to the "other": "The truckdriver . . . represents the mythical character, the sailor, the adventurer, he is from a different world. . . . This strangeness is reinforced by the style adopted for this sequence that I call "The Time of Reportage," in which we gaze at others . . . that are different. An almost ethnological gaze" ("*Je tu il elle*," press-book for Unité Trois, Paris, my translation).

29   André Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scène," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 76.

30   Rich, for example, reads Akerman's cinematic specificity correctly—the fairy tale quality of her plots, the sexual explicitness of *Je tu il elle*, the tactics of reduction and hyperbole—only to consider it basically a negation of conventional expectations. Rich, "Chantal Akerman's Meta Cinema."

31   This phrase is a combination of several reductive phrases spread out in writings on *Jeanne Dielman*.

32   See Denise Riley, "*Am I That Name?*" *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

33   She adds that "it was a good idea to think about what a feminist film is, but I don't believe in the end it means very much." Susan Barrowclough, "Chantal Akerman: Adventures in Perception." *Monthly Film Bulletin* (Great Britain) 51 (April 1984), 105.

34   Akerman, quoted in Angela Martin, "Chantal Akerman's Films: Notes on Issues Raised for Feminism," in *Films for Women*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 62. Akerman has asserted her feminist stakes by defending a feminist form: "I do think [*Jeanne Dielman*] is a feminist film because I give space to things which were never . . . shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. . . . it's a feminist film—not just what it says but *what* is shown and *how* it's shown. "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*: Excerpts from an Interview with *Camera Obscura*, November 1976." *Camera Obscura* 2 (Fall 1977), 118–19.

35   Martin, 63.

36   In the introduction to her book, Mayne indicates her awareness of the gap between Akerman's work and the parameters of the theories usually mobilized for its analysis. See Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 7.

37   Arlette Farge, "Women's History: An Overview," in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 136. Setting the project of women's history in a historical context, this article acknowledges the relative positivism of the early accounts of women's history, which were more concerned with description than with theoretical reflection.

38   Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, "La Micro-histoire," in *Le Débat* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 133.

39   Farge, "Women's History," 140–41.

40   For informed anti-essentialist analyses of the relations between historiography and feminism, see Riley, *Am I That Name?;* Catherine Gallagher, "Marxism and the New Historicism," in *The New Historicism,* ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 37–48; and Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie, eds., *The Woman in Question* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).

41   For an analysis of differences among temporalities, see Fernand Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*," in *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25–54.

42   Jacques Le Goff, *A História Nova* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Fontes Editora, 1990), 32.

43   Riley, *Am I That Name?,* 5.

44   Copjec; "m/f, or Not Reconciled," in *The Woman in Question,* 12.

45   Riley, *Am I That Name?,* 5.

46   See Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977,* ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 126.

47   Foucault, "Truth and Power," 126.

48   Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," in *Language, Memory, Counterpractice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 207–8.

49   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

50   Michèle Levieux, "Propos de Chantal Akerman: Du côté chez Kafka," *Écran* (France) 75 (December 1978), 47–52.

51   Levieux, 49.

52   Akerman, in "Entretien avec Françoise Maupin," 17.

53   See Alice Jardine's discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* in "Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and his Br(others)," *Substance* 13.3/4 (1984), 46–60.

54   See Akerman, quoted in Michel Grodent, "*Les Rendez-Vous D'Anna* de Chantal Akerman; un film sur l'histoire," *Le Soir,* 23 February 1978, 20. See also Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* 16–27.

55   Akerman, "Nouveau Cinema comme Nouveau Roman," in *Le Monde,* 22 January 1976, p. 15.

56   Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson. "The 'Subject' of Feminism," in *The Woman in Question,* 81–101.

57   Adams and Minson, 82.

58   Adams and Minson, 82.

59   See Akerman, "Entretien avec Chantal Akerman," interview by Danièle Du-
     broux, Thérèse Giraud, and Louis Skorecki, 35.
60   Akerman, *Les Rendez Vous D'Anna,* in *Chantal Akerman,* Cahier 1, ed. Jac-
     queline Aubernas (Brussels: Atelier des Arts, 1982), 17. My translation.
61   Akerman and Jean-Luc Godard, "Entretien avec Jean-Luc Godard," *Ça Cinéma*
     19 (1st trimester, 1980), 11.

## 1   Nothing Happens: Time for the Everyday in
## Postwar Realist Cinema

1    André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles:
     University of California Press, 1971), 29.
2    Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," *Yale French Studies* 73 (New Haven:
     Yale University Press, 1987), 13.
3    Of *Umberto D,* Bazin writes: "The narrative unit is not the episode, . . . the
     sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of
     concrete instants of life, . . . for their ontological equality destroys drama at its
     very basis" (81).
4    Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in *Film: A Montage of Theories,*
     ed. Richard Dyer MacCann (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966), 219.
5    Think, for instance, of the scene in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Our Hitler* where
     Hitler's valet de chambre describes for the camera the Fuhrer's daily under-
     wear routine. Likewise, think of Godard's strategies of protraction in *Every
     Man for Himself* allowing what is "in between images" to be perceived as
     worthy of attention.
6    Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 15.
7    Blanchot, 12.
8    For a detailed account of this project and its confusing titling see Henri Le-
     febvre's *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971),
     26–64.
9    Lefebvre, 32.
10   Guy Debord, "Perspectives For Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life," in
     *Situationist International Anthology,* ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bu-
     reau of Public Secrets, 1981), 70.
11   Debord, "Perspectives," 70.
12   Debord, "Perspectives," 69.
13   Raoul Vaneigem, "The Role of Godard," in *Situationist International Anthol-
     ogy,* 176.
14   Lefebvre, *Everyday Life,* 33 and 40. For the translation, I took the liberty of
     substituting "consciousness" for "Conscience," which carries a moralistic
     connotation absent from Lefebvre's use of the French *Conscience.*
15   Lefebvre, 34.
16   Lefebvre, 37.
17   The rereading of Hegel by several philosophers in the early thirties took off in
     several directions. Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From
     Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), chap. 1. For
     Lacanian psychoanalysis, the concept of alienation is the founding possibility
     of subjectivity itself. About Lacan's relation to existential marxism, see Poster,
     318–23.

18  Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Film and the New Psychology," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 58.

19  Merleau-Ponty, "The Film," 58.

20  Merleau-Ponty, "The Film," 59.

21  Bazin, "The French Renoir," in *Jean Renoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 90.

22  Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," 220.

23  Bazin, "The French Renoir," 90.

24  Annette Michelson, introduction to *Theory of Film Practice*, by Noel Burch (New York: Praeger, 1973), ix.

25  Amedée Ayfre, "Neorealism and Phenomenology," in *Cahiers du Cinéma; the 1950s*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

26  Ayfre, 185.

27  Similarly, Merleau-Ponty's theoretical juggling of film, Gestalt theory, phenomenology, and existentialism demarcates the affinities between film and description.

28  Merleau-Ponty, "The Film," 156.

29  Jacques Derrida, " 'Genesis and Structure' and Phenomenology," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 156 and 157.

30  Philip Rosen, "History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin," *Wide Angle* 9.4 (1987), 12.

31  Rosen, 15.

32  Philippe Hamon, "The Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive," *Yale French Studies* 61 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 22.

33  Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scène," in *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, 65–66.

34  See Bazin, 66.

35  See Paul Hockings, ed. *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1975), 9.

36  John Marshall and Emile de Brigard, "Idea and Event in Urban Film," in Hockings, 134.

37  Colin Young, "Observational Cinema," in Hockings, 66.

38  See James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

39  The fact that French cinema verité's earnest essentialism can propose itself as reflexive reveals the similarity between practices purporting to reveal "reality" transparently and those exposing the reality of cinema's materiality.

40  For an excellent discussion of direct cinema's noninterventionist agenda see Paul Arthur, "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 118–26.

41  Cinema verité's need to turn lenses and tape recorders on the filmmaker coincides, in Europe, with an ethnography in crisis (a process present in Jean Rouch's reverse ethnography since the early fifties), with the political malaise of French intellectuals during the war in Algeria, and, before that, with the disclosure of Stalin's totalitarianism.

42  Bazin, "The Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2, 130, 131.

43  Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, Humanism and Tragedy," in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 57.

44   Robbe-Grillet, 68.

45   Poster, "Existential Marxism," 324.

46   Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*, 56.

47   Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xvii.

48   While Lefebvre's defense of speech as the site of a unity of sign and meaning hardly survives Derrida's analysis of the complicity of speech with a metaphysics of presence and origin, Baudrillard's later writings seem to confirm the impossibility of a stable referent in the widespread process of simulation that informs all society. See Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction,* trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); and *Simulations,* trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

49   Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard* (New York: a da Capo Press, 1972), 49.

50   Godard, *2 ou 3 choses que Je sais d'Elle* (Paris: Seuil/L'Avant Scène, 1971), 69.

51   Cesare Zavattini. "Some Ideas on the Cinema," 218.

52   Zavattini, 224.

53   Zavattini, 220.

54   Margaret Mead, "Visual Anthropology in a Discourse of Words," in Hockings, *Visual Anthropology,* 9.

55   Writings on Andy Warhol's cinema have for the most part emphasized the same points raised in my argument. For a broader view on Warhol's politics of indifferentiation see Stephen Koch, *The Stargazer: Andy Warhol and His Films* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973). See also P. Adams Sitney's chapter on structural film in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde (1943–1978),* 2d ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) and the essays collected in *Andy Warhol Film Factory,* ed. Michael O'Pray (London: British Film Institute, 1989).

56   Marsha Kinder, "The Subversive Potential of the Pseudo-iterative," *Film Quarterly* 43.2 (Winter 1989–90), 8. This essay has been highly provocative for my own thoughts on the issue of typicality. I owe to Kinder the perception of how Bazin oversees the implications of analytic editing in *Umberto D.*

## 2   Toward a Corporeal Cinema: Theatricality in the '70s

1   Michael Snow. "Two Letters and Notes on Films," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism,* ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 186.

2   Chantal Akerman, "Statements collected by José Vieria Marques," in pressbook of *Jeanne Dielman* in Festival de Figueira da Foz, Berlin, July 1975.

3   Perhaps one of the main texts to underly this opposition as central to a modernist gesture in art is Merleau-Ponty's essay on Cézanne "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics,* ed. James Edie (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–92.

4   In an interview with Marsha Kinder, Akerman states that when she saw the films of Michael Snow and Jonas Mekas, they opened her mind to "the relationship between film and your body" in Kinder, "Reflections on *Jeanne Dielman,*" *Film Quarterly* 30.4 (Summer 1977), 2.

5   Snow's reference to Cézanne's negotiation of modernism and realism in paint-
    ing in the epigraph to this chapter perceptively defines the break from a pre-
    scriptive to a descriptive cinema present in filmographies quite different from
    the avant-garde.

6   See Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image Music, Text*, trans. and
    ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 32–51.

7   Snow, "Two Letters and Notes on Films," 186.

8   Akerman, "Getting Ready for *The Golden Eighties:* A Conversation with Chan-
    tal Akerman by Gary Indiana," *Artforum* 21.10 (Summer 1983), 58.

9   The camera maintains some of the characteristics of autonomy in relation to
    the profilmic event that other structural filmmakers have used. It is a particular
    version of the primitive ghost rides (a type of record issuing from a camera
    mounted in moving trams or cars, filming randomly whatever crosses its path)
    that is retransformed in Ernie Gehr's *Eureka* (1974) within the vocabulary of
    mechanical reproduction dear to structural minimal filmmaking.

10  Richard Kwietniowski, "Separations: Chantal Akerman's *News From Home*
    (1976) and *Toute une Nuit* (1982)" in *Movie* 34–35 (Winter 1990), 111. This
    inspired article details Akerman's procedures making clear its use of symme-
    try, as well as the perceptual demands posed by Akerman's minimalism.

11  Akerman, "Statements," July 1975.

12  Benning, "James Benning," in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Indepen-
    dent Filmmakers*, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of
    California Press, 1992), 232.

13  Michael Fried's criticism of the effect of presence (the theatricality) of minimal
    art is a major inspiration for my own understanding of cinema's corporeal
    dimensions. See, Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical An-
    thology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968).

14  See Clement Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," in *Art and Culture: Critical
    Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 139.

15  Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists," in *Super Realism: A Critical Anthol-
    ogy*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), 77 and 78. Nochlin
    also points out that Yvonne Jacquette's painting of spaces between objects
    displays a distinctly phenomenological concern with the description of the
    insignificant.

16  Richard Estes as cited by Nochlin in "Realism Now," in *Super Realism*, 118.

17  Audrey Flack cited in Udo Kulterman, *New Realism* (Greenwich Conn.: New
    York Graphic Society, 1972), 15.

18  Rosalind Krauss, "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," in *Discussions in
    Contemporary Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 63–64.

19  In Robert Morris and Donald Judd among others, repetition, seriality, and the
    use of mass produced units and materials were meant to thwart intentionality
    through a decided equivalence and lack of internal hierarchy among the com-
    ponents of a work. See Judd, "Interview with Judd and Stella," in *Minimal Art*,
    150.

20  See Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression," in
    *Robert Morris* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969), 69; Maurice
    Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960's* (New York:
    Harper and Row, 1989), 53.

21   Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture" in *Minimal Art*, 234.

22   See John Cage, "Cinema Now; A Symposium in Cincinnati," *Perspectives in American Underground Film: Stan Brakhage, John Cage, Jonas Mekas, Stan Vanderbeek* (University of Cincinnati Press, n.d.), 9.

23   The particulars of these two filmic projects (among other examples of "pure film") are addressed at length by David James in his book *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

24   For a comprehensive panorama of the period under consideration see Paul Arthur, "Structural Film; Revisions, New Versions and the Artifact-Part I," *Millenium Film Journal* 2 (Spring/Summer 78), 5–13, and part 2 in *MFJ* 4 (Winter 79/80), 22–34, as well as James, 237–75.

25   Patricia Patterson and Manny Farber, "Kitchen without Kitch: Beyond the New Wave: 1," in *Film Comment* 13.6 (November–December 1977), 47. "Dispersion" and "shallowboxed space" are main characteristics of the two aesthetics—of heterogeneity and of homogeneity—I describe in this chapter.

26   Patterson and Farber, 47.

27   Stationed in passages and public vehicles, the camera in *Hotel Monterey* and *News from Home* represents a variant from structural minimalism. There, views from windows characterize the curiosity for the real (as in Ernie Gehr's *Still*, 1971), and filming inside enclosed spaces allows a control over human interference, secured either through absence (Gehr's *Serene Velocity* 1970) or through mise-en-scène (Snow's *Wavelength* and *Back and Forth*). Akerman's camera moves into spaces of transit. The hotel provides a relatively stationary place within the city's turbulence, granting Akerman a controlled contact with passersby, while allowing them, at least theoretically, the freedom simply to avoid her camera.

28   I have not watched *La Chambre 1* which is 11 minutes long and has sound. The film I analyze throughout this chapter is *La Chambre 2* which is silent and is 7 minutes long.

29   The exploration of most video art in the early seventies revolves around confirming endlessly the delusions of self-presence. The play with the discrepancies between image and language offers a scenario of dislocation of the self which underlies most of the art done in this period. Bruce Nauman's *Lip Synch* (1969), Peter Campus's *mem* and *dor* installations (1974), Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1974), Linda Benglis's *Now* (1973), Joan Jonas' *Vertical Roll* (1972), 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.

30   Marguerite Duras's *India Song* (1974), *Woman of the Ganges* (1973), and *Son Nom de Venise dans Calcutta Desert* (1976) are all propped on two interrelated Duras' novels. Likewise, Straub and Huillet's *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's Accompaniment for a Cinematographic Scene"* (1972), *Othon* (1969), *Cézanne* (1989) constitute radical reconfigurations of their base texts as documents of history.

31.   Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Fang, Methuen, 1964).

32   Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painter and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

33    Eric Rohmer, "Film and the Three Levels of Discourse: Indirect, Direct, and Hyperdirect," in *The Taste of Beauty,* trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

34    Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre,* 193. Likewise he passes judgment on theatrical and Hollywood musicals: "Nothing is more revolting than the actor pretending not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing. The three levels—plain speech, heightened speech and singing—must always remain distinct and in no case should heightened speech represent an intensification of plain speech or singing of heightened speech" (44).

35    See Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

36    P. Adams Sitney has described Robert Bresson's subversive linearity in opposition to a geometrical editing. "For the most part, radical formalism in cinema has been geometrical: Eisenstein, L'Herbier, Kuleshov, Vertov, Kubelka . . . use the alternative positions of the camera, . . . to articulate a solid geometry of cinema in which the various angles . . . combine to give the illusion of a cubic spatial field. . . . The linear style on the other hand suggests tapestry or bas relief as the pictorial metaphor for cinema, not sculptural space. . . . Bresson has deliberately developed an antigeographical approach; he has linearized the metonymic principle by discrete movements of the camera which change carefully set up long shots to significant closeups and vice versa." Sitney, "The Rhetoric of Robert Bresson," in *The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives,* ed. P. A. Sitney (New York: New York University Press and Anthology Film Archives, 1975), 185–56 and 188. Sitney's distinction between geometrical and linear editing is basic in defining an *aesthetics of homogeneity.*

37    Sitney, 188.

38    For the antimetaphysical implications of the notion of quotation see Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

39    Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography,* trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 51.

40    See Thomas Elsaesser, "Editorial: The Cinema of Irony," *Monogram* 5 (n.d.).

41    Walter Benjamin makes clear the social implications of the epic theater: "[It] appeals to an interest group 'who do not think without reason.'" Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?" in *Illuminations,* ed. Hanna Arendt (New York: Schoken Books, 1969), 148.

42    Jean Luc Godard, *Introduction à une Véritable Histoire du Cinéma,* vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1980), 66.

43    Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," in *Film Culture,* ed. P. Adams Sitney (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), 414. Peter Wollen expanded on Michelson's insights in his two subsequent articles "The Two Avant Gardes," *Edinburgh Magazine* 1 (1976), and "'Ontology' and 'Materialism' in Film," *Screen* 17.1 (Spring 1976).

44    Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," 412.

45    Bresson and Dreyer, though consistently invoked as masters of cinematic modernism, are part of a formalist critical canon little concerned with the politics of anti-illusionism. David Bordwell, discussing Dreyer, and P. Adams Sitney,

in brilliant analyses of Dreyer and Bresson, define the modernist and classical lineages of these filmmakers. See Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981); and *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); and P. Adams Sitney, *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Another writer who also canonizes a non-Godardian aesthetics but with less critical finesse is Paul Schrader, in his *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer* (New York, a da Capo Press, 1972). My take on the corporeality of Bresson and Dreyer's cinema runs counter to Schrader's linkage of their work's concreteness to Zen Buddhism and a transcendental religiosity.

46   For some examples of an equation of Brechtian distanciation techniques and filmic strategies see Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature from D. Quixote to J. L. Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Julia Lesage, "Visual Distancing in Godard," *Wide Angle* 1.3 (1976); Marilyn Campbell, "Life Itself: *Vivre sa Vie* and the Language of Film," *Wide Angle* 1.3 (1976); Colin McCabe, "The Politics of Separation," *Screen* 16.4 (Winter 1975/76), as well as Stephen Heath, "From Brecht to Film: Theses, Problems," *Screen* 16.4 (Winter 1975/76). For a critique of an immediate assumption of politics as issuing from a formal self-reflexivity, see Dana Polan, "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film, in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2. ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

47   Silvia Harvey, *May 68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 69–71.

48   Harvey, 73.

49   Pascal Bonitzer, "La Notion de Plan et de Sujet du Cinéma: Les Deux Regards," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 275 (April 1977): 40–45.

50   Peter Gidal, "Theory and Definition of Structural Materialist Film," in *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 1.

51   Gidal, 1.

52   Akerman, "Statements," 1975.

53   In the attempt to circumvent an explicit enunciation on cinematic language, Wenders opts for narrative through a complex concept of transparency. See Wenders, *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 1.

54   For an understanding of the link between minimalism and the uncanny effect of presence see Fried's "Art and Objecthood."

55   Carl T. Dreyer, "Interview with Borge Trolle," *Film Culture* 41 (Summer 1966), 59.

56   In an interview with Michel Delahaye in 1965 Dreyer states: "In theatre . . . words fill the space, hang in the air. One can hear them, feel them, sense their weight. But in cinema words are too soon relegated to a background that absorbs them." C. T. Dreyer, *Reflexions sur mon Métier* (Paris: Editions Étoile, 1983), 121. He claims to have corrected that with *Gertrud*.

57   Carl T. Dreyer, statements collected by Yvonne Baby, *Le Monde*, 17 December 1964.

58   Eric Rohmer, "Film and the Three Levels of Discourse: Indirect, Direct and Hyperdirect," in *The Taste of Beauty*, 84.

59   Dreyer. In "The Real Talking film" (1933), Dreyer claims that one can "keep on stripping a dialogue of entire speeches, sentences, words—without any other effect than that the writer's thoughts stand out even more clearly." "The talking film presents itself like a theatre piece in concentrated form." Dreyer, *Dreyer in Double Reflection: Translations of Carl Th. Dreyer's Writings about Film*, ed. Donald Skoller (New York: A Da Capo Press, 1973), 54.

60   David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 148.

61   See mainly Germaine Dulac's writings "From 'Visual and anti-Visual Films' " and "The Essence of the Cinema: The Visual Idea," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978). The tendency of formalist critics to privilege the visual track has to do most immediately with the need to avoid the theatrical model. The proscription of verbal content is only a manifestation of a modernist proscription of referentiality.

62   Bordwell, *Carl-Theodor Dreyer*, 149.

63   André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema—Part One," in *What is Cinema?* vol. 1, I, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 87–90.

64   André Bazin, "The Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, 136.

65   James Schamus, "Dreyer's Textual Realism," in *Carl-Th. Dreyer*, ed. Jitte Jensen (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 60.

66   The internalization of another's voice, apparent in adaptations, is especially keen in certain historical films. The documentarism of Roberto Rossellini's *The Rise to Power of Louis the XIV* or Straub and Huillet's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* suggest a textualized profilmic reality. They actualize music and dialogue, as well as scenic details, accessible solely through documents.

67   In his *Notes on Cinematography*, Bresson says: "Words do not always coincide with thought. Earlier, later. The aping of this non-coincidence is dreadful in films" (51).

68   Bresson's version of cinema as flattened surface is aimed as an antidote to what he perceives as the main nemesis of cinema: theatre.

69   Bresson has claimed an essential core to the model, one however he believes can be reached by automatism: "Models, mechanized outwardly. Intact, virgin within" (42). The attempt to formulate a performatic instance that completely excludes consciousness is of course extremely romantic and in several respects close to the essentialism of some of body and performance art.

### 3   The Equivalence of Events: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*

1   Kenneth Burke, "On Tragedy," in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), 285.

2   Chantal Akerman, "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman:* Excerpts from an Interview with *Camera Obscura*, November 1976." *Camera Obscura* 2 (Fall 1977), 120.

3   Ben Singer, "*Jeanne Dielman:* Cinematic Interrogation and 'Amplification,' " *Millenium Film Journal* 22 (Winter/Spring 1989–90), 58–59. This "repetitive

and self-conscious system of prefacing cuts" Singer perceives as Akerman's strategy for calling attention to the cut through what he terms a trope of standardization.

4   Singer, 64.

5   Singer, 64.

6   Ruth Perlmutter, "Visible Woman, Visible Narrative," *Millenium Film Journal* 6 (Spring 1980).

7   Aesthetics of homogeneity approximates what Ruth Perlmutter calls "undernarratives": "Undernarratives separate and recompose the elements of traditional narrative. They differ, therefore, from avant-garde films' attempts to transcend narrative structures or cinematic autonomy by incorporating other art forms." Perlmutter, 19.

8   In his article "Primitivism and the Avant Gardes: A Dialectical Approach," Noel Burch writes that *Jeanne Dielman* "studiously avoids any direct matching, indispensable to the principle of camera ubiquity in the Institution" (in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader,* ed. Philip Rosen [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], 504). In emphasizing the antiinstitutional thrust common to the "primitive stare" Burch ahistorically disregards how Akerman differs from her avant-garde contemporaries (Andy Warhol, Ernie Gehr, and Michael Snow, for instance). Moreover, what gets consistently repressed in formal analyses is the representational content of the films themselves.

9   Akerman, "*Jeanne Dielman,*" 119. Although these statements approximate direct cinema's claim of noninterference, Akerman's hyperbolic use of such devices within a fiction film compounding duration, fixed frame, and stylized performance warrants her distance from an essentialist cinema.

10   Akerman, "*Jeanne Dielman,*" 119.

11   Heath, "Repetition Time," in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). The antinarrative thrust of avant-garde film is of course not restricted to structural film. One of the main proponents of a deflection of memory is Stan Brakhage, in his romantic abstractionism.

12   Heath, 171.

13   Akerman, "*Jeanne Dielman,*" 120.

14   Singer claims the film is "densely overinscribed with a traditionally male type of looking." He invokes, however, one factor that seems to qualify voyeurism rather than promote it: he points out that we have not been granted a justified access to the diegesis through a point-of-view structure—that our sole means of identification is with the camera. (Singer, "*Jeanne Dielman,*" 65–66).

15   In "*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* by Chantal Akerman," Janet Bergstrom suggests that the absence of reverse shots guarantees the split between the character and the director's logics. "The camera look can't be construed as the view of any character. Its interest extends beyond the fiction. . . ." Bergstrom (*Camera Obscura* 2 (Fall 1977), 117).

16   Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 72.

17   Roland Barthes, "Objective Literature: Alain Robbe-Grillet," in *Jealousy,* by Alain Robbe-Grillet (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 17.

18   Barthes, 13–27. In this essay Barthes states how for Robbe-Grillet "the object is no longer a common-room of correspondences, a welter of sensations and symbols, but merely the occasion of a certain optical resistance" (15).

19   Barthes, 15.

20   The fundamental uncertainty about the identity of the hyperrealist image can be tentatively theorized through the internal dissimilitude of the simulacrum. Its relation to the copy is discussed by Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 27 (Winter 1983), 48, 49.

21   Rosalind Krauss, "LeWitt in Progress," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 253.

22   Krauss, 253.

23   Krauss, 253.

24   Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, eds. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

25   Shklovsky, 12.

26   Against the conceptual abstraction that allows access to the object through its habitual "name" Shklovsky proposes an impediment of perception so that "the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of perception" (12).

27   For a more comprehensive analysis see Paul Arthur's two-part essay "Structural Film: Versions, Revisions and the Artifact," *Millenium Film Journal* 1 and 2. (Spring/Summer 1978 and Winter 1979/80).

28   Thierry de Duve, "Les Trois Horloges," in *Chantal Akerman*, Cahier 1, ed. Jaqueline Aubenas (Brussels: Atelier des Arts, 1982), 89. For de Duve the film's complex temporality is the crucible of three conceptions of time. The first is a Newtonian conception in which time derives from dynamics, and it is linked to classical tragedy in that each of the tragic actors "has its own destiny, his/her own personal internal force (mass by acceleration)." The second version of time is related to thermodynamics: in the film, this concept is related to real time. And the third version, indicated by the glaring absence of clocks in the film, "corresponds to neguentropy or information" (94, 95, 96).

29   Michael Snow, "Two Letters and Notes on Films," in *The Avant-Garde Film Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 186.

30   André Bazin, "Le Grand Diptyque: Geologie et Relief," in *Orson Welles* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1972), 60 (my translation).

31   Jean Luc Godard states, "I perceived, . . . cinema is that which is between things, not things, but between one and another, between me and you." Jean Luc Godard, *Introduction à une Veritable Histoire du Cinéma*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1980), 145.

32   See Annette Michelson's analysis of Snow's *Wavelength* in "Toward Snow," in *Avant-Garde Film*, 172–83.

33   Snow, "Two Letters and Notes on Films," 186.

34   Manny Farber, "Canadian Underground," in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 250.

35   Michelson, "Toward Snow," 174.

36   See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde (1943–1978)*,

2d ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 438. This recurrent dichotomy between interior and exterior, controlled and uncontrolled events, informs structural film and becomes, in fact, in the best of these works, its main trope. In Akerman's *Hotel Monterey,* the *aubade* is the explicit event external to the film's mounting toward the last floor of the hotel (following in a way *Empire*'s natural progression, starting as it does at night).

37   See Koch's qualified note of this "climatic event" slightly bracketing his own assertion to fit a "customary" critical neglect to structural and minimal work's "content" or "plot." Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: Andy Warhol's World and His Films* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), 60.

38   Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 201. This show was part of a series of seven-minute performances organized by the composer LaMonte Young at the Living Theater in 1961.

39   Snow, "Two Letters," 186. "The various kinds of events imply or demonstrate links which are more or less 'stories.' "

40   Snow, 187.

41   The use of violent actions—a fight or a murder—constitutes liminal situations for representation, in that such actions supposedly preclude literalization. Such actions are, therefore, appropriate illustrations for dramatic content in structural minimalist film. Content in Snow's work is always parasitic and is always used as an effect of wit, of ironic paradox.

42   This notion of a double "narrative" is described in Sitney's analysis of *Wavelength:* "Things happen in the room of *Wavelength,* and things happen to the film of the room. The convergence of the two kinds of happening and their subsequent metamorphosis create for the viewer a continually changing experience of cinematic illusion and anti-illusion" (*Visionary Film,* 378).

43   Jean-Paul Belmondo's spastic run after being shot, his fall and the gestures he performs of closing his own eyes, retrace an entire history of the representation of death in Western cinema: from neorealism (Anna Magnani's death in Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City*) to Hollywood Westerns (Anthony Mann). It significantly comments as well on method acting—Marlon Brando's performance in *On the Waterfront* being the precise reverse of Belmondo's in direction (from defeat to confrontation) and in thrust (one serious and the other ironic).

44   See Catherine Russell's original argument about the representation of death in narrative cinema in *Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure and New Wave Cinemas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

45   Although the scarcity of characters and purposive deflation of relationships precludes a direct association of *Jeanne Dielman* with melodrama, a few attributes of the film recall the melodramatic mode. Characters embody attributes without "naturally" changing channels of behavior. The intensity produced by the cumulative actions of an initially affectless protagonist, is, in *Jeanne Dielman,* displaced onto the objects and domestic scene. See Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 62. This homology, between set and character, is in *Jeanne Dielman* nonsymbolic but still pervaded with affect and intensity.

46  Elsaesser, 64.

47  Linda Williams, "Something Else besides a Mother," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 320.

48  See André Bazin, "La Mort tous les après midi," in *Qu'est ce que le Cinema?*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1958), 70.

49  Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 205.

50  Mayne, 206.

51  Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," *October* 17 (Summer 1981), 35.

52  Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, 251.

53  Several essays in *Obsessional States*, ed. Howard R. Beech (London: Methuen, 1974), describe variations in behavior for the obsessional compulsive. For an even more simplified version see David Shapiro, *Neurotic Styles* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1965).

54  Perhaps one of the uncanniest moments in the film comes as Jeanne waits for the shops to open early in the morning and passes by a street, not her own, and sees a bright red number 23 painted on the door. At a certain moment the metal door of the butcher shop starts rolling up, seemingly on its own.

55  Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Studies in Parapsychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

56  Through etymological research into the meaning of the German word "unheimlich"—"uncanny," or, more literally, "unhomely"—Freud arrives at two contradictory definitions, which he resolves through a psychoanalytic reading. For Freud, the uncanny is both that which causes estrangement—something concealed or secret—and that which is homelike, familiar.

57  See Danièle Dubroux, "Le Familier inquiétant (*Jeanne Dielman*)," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 269, (March–April 1976): 17–20.

58  Freud, "The Uncanny," 31.

59  Freud, 31.

60  See Freud, 57.

61  Naomi Schor, "Duane Hanson: Truth in Sculpture," in *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 139. On the lack of deception of the naked sculpture, Schor quotes Harold Rosemberg's review of the "Sharp Focus Realism" exhibition held at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, in 1972.

62  Michael Fried has pointed out the inherent uncanninness of minimalist sculpture, its effect of presence as the beholder confronts the work in time: "In fact, being distanced by such objects is not . . . entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly . . . can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way." Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 128.

63  Schor, "Duane Hanson," in *Reading in Detail*, 139. She equates this disturbance with the sort of detail that, in its hyperrealist quality, goes beyond its denotative functions, granting to the figures it "excessively dresses" a quality of exemplarity.

64 The uncanny results, therefore, from a surplus of reality effect—an effect that reminds one precisely of the double distance operative in the hyperrealist image. The double works in the hyperrealist image as an extra token of the lack of reality, the insistence on repeating the repeatable. Through this supplementarity the hyperrealist image inscribes *differance* as the condition for reproduction and repetition—the previously mentioned quality of the simulacrum.

65 The uncanny feeling associated with Akerman's emphasis on mimesis can be understood through Roger Callois's concept of mimicry as the temptation of an organism to assimilate to its surroundings ("Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October* 31 [Winter 1984]). This procedure is seen not only as defensive but as a wish for a submersion into in-difference, an abdication of what Denis Hollier calls "that fundamentally vital difference between life and matter, between the organic and the inorganic" ("Mimesis and Castration," *October* 31 [Winter 1984], 11).

66 The links between the compulsion to repeat, the death drive, and the automaton are developed further in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1961).

67 Krauss, "LeWitt in Progress," 255. Krauss uses this expression to counter the idealist contours of the epithet of conceptual art applied to LeWitt's work. It is especially appropriate in terms of other minimalist expressions equally ridden with an arational impulse—such as Akerman's cinema.

68 Another stone image, besides Shklovsky's "stoniness of the stone," is therefore required in characterizing Akerman's work. The image that punctuates Krauss's analysis of the obsession subtending minimalist procedures of repetition in "LeWitt in Progress" is appropriate: Beckett's Molloy shuffles the stones across from his pockets in a methodic confirmation of nothing except the very lack of logic in seriality or closed circuitry. See Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 69.

69 de Duve, "Les Trois Horloges," 90, 91.

70 de Duve, 91.

71 Claire Johnston, "Toward a Feminist Film Practice: Some Theses" in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 326.

72 I do not mean to imply an antecedence to Johnston's analysis but rather the commonality of her discourse and that of Janet Bergstrom, Marsha Kinder, Judith Mayne, Brenda Longfellow, B. Ruby Rich, etc.

73 Loader, "*Jeanne Dielman:* Death in Installments," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 339.

74 Brenda Longfellow, "Love Letters to the Mother: Chantal Akerman's Films," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13.1–2, (1989), 84.

75 Akerman, "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*."

76 Reinforcing the lack of psychology for the character Akerman states: "You will never know what is happening in her mind and in her heart. I don't know either. It is not Jeanne Dielman's secret, it's Delphine [Seyrig's] secret. Akerman, "Getting Ready for *The Golden Eighties:* A Conversation with Chantal Akerman," *Artforum* 21.10 (Summer 1983), 59.

77 Akerman, "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*," 120.

78    Longfellow claims that this last image sustains "the memory of her refusal and something else: a rage and a passion which might just permit the journey of the mother to the side of feminism" ("Love Letters," 84).

79    See Stephen Koch, *Stargazer*, 137. Koch's linkage of Warhol's themes, the stillness of his films, and his arbitrariness with his fascination with death is, of course, particularly relevant for a study of *Jeanne Dielman*, which owes so much to Warhol's durational strategies. The main paradigm for an understanding of the "lethal" qualities of minimal hyperrealism is Warhol's work, as well as Koch's accurate insights.

80    Akerman, "Chantal Akerman on *Jeanne Dielman*," 120.

81    Joan Copjec, "Apparatus and Umbra: A Critique of Feminist Film Theory" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1986), 10. See also Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against Historicists* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 39–63.

82    Copjec, "Apparatus and Umbra," 10.

83    Having as his main reference Freud's "Repeating, Remembering and Working Through," Lacan refers to the notion of reproduction (in analysis) as pertaining to "the optimistic days of catharsis." He says: "One had the primal scene in reproduction as today one has pictures of the great masters for 9 francs 50. But what Freud showed . . . was that nothing can be grasped, destroyed or burnt, except in a symbolic way, as one says, in effigie, in absentia" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* [New York and London: Norton, 1978], 50). If I bring this impossibility up in relation to the film, it is because the same underlying anti-essentialist claim is valid in both the case of psychoanalysis and in that of film. Moreover, this film intimates, in its running thematics of inertia and obsessive compulsiveness, a continuous clarification of the sort of repetitions operative in both the film and the character's life.

84    Copjec, "Apparatus and Umbra," 8. Copjec's argument leads ultimately to a pointed critique of the determinism underlying the ongoing feminist debate of the cinematic apparatus. My own interest in these versions of the term "automaton" is justified by a similar concern in disproving causality as a representable entity in film.

85    Copjec, "Apparatus and Umbra," 10.

86    Copjec, "Apparatus and Umbra," 9.

87    The successful invocation of two apparently contradictory endings in *Jeanne Dielman* is, in some ways, similar to the procedure pointed out by Noel Carroll in his reading of *Citizen Kane* in "Interpreting *Citizen Kane*," *Persistence of Vision* 7 (1989). The two conflicting interpretations of the film—the Rosebud image and the "puzzle structure," the enigma view—are both posed in an extremely clear way and are each backed up in the film at several points. Carroll claims that *Citizen Kane*'s proposal of these two views about life constitutes both the movie's special appeal for its audience and the possibility of the film's establishing itself as art as well as mass product.

## 4    Expanding the "I": Character in Experimental Feminist Narrative

1    Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 111.

2   See Julia Lesage, "Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," in *Films for Women*, ed. Charlotte Brundsdon (London: British Film Institute, 1986).

3   See David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 321–24.

4   Laura Mulvey, "Film, Feminism, and the Avant Garde," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 117.

5   Mulvey, 123.

6   David James's analysis of *Sigmund Freud's Dora* clarifies feminist film's embrace of theory. See *Allegories of Cinema*, 334.

7   The close relation between Rainer's films and the theoretical debates around them becomes increasingly explicit in her later films such as *Journeys From Berlin/1971* (1980) and *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985). For a comprehensive picture of the implications of this dialogue, see Noel Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who . . . ," *Millenium Film Journal* 7/8/9 (Fall/Winter 1980–81); Rainer's response to *Camera Obscura*'s claims about her formal politics, "Yvonne Ranier: Interview," *Camera Obscura* 1 (Fall 1976); and James's *Allegories of Cinema*, 326–33.

8   For an interesting analysis of what is called "theoretical" in avant-garde or experimental cinema, see Carroll, "Avant Garde Film and Theory," *Millennium Film Journal* 4/5 (Summer/Fall 1979), 141. See also Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 90.

9   In "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A," Rainer parallels minimalist sculpture and dance, defining some of the constants of minimalism. Collected in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968).

10  Rainer, "A Quasi Survey," 269.

11  Janet Bergstrom notes this distinction in "*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* by Chantal Akerman," *Camera Obscura* 2 (Fall 1977), 114.

12  Yvonne Rainer, *Yvonne Rainer Work 1961–73* (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 276.

13  Peter Kubelka, Stanley Brakhage, and Maya Deren are only three of the filmmakers who confront the syntagmatic order that had become the norm for cinema's legibility. Deren establishes a distinction basic to an alternative narrative form, one she claims is more akin to the intensity of poetic associations than the linear, "horizontal" logic of linear narrative or prose. ("Poetry and Film: Symposium, with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Chairman Amos Vogel. Organized by Amos Vogel," in *Film Culture: An Anthology*, ed. P. Adams Sitney [London: Secker & Warburg, 1971], 174, 178, 179).

14  In later work—*Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), for instance—Rainer makes more use of heterogeneous material. Here, her collage consists mostly of interrupting the linear and dramatic flow, always adding one more example. The narrative swells without advancing.

15  For a critical assessment of Rainer's cinematic attack on the mechanisms of

identification in *The Man Who Envied Women,* see Peggy Phelan's brilliant analysis of Rainer's rearticulation of spectatorial address in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993). See also B. Ruby Rich's "Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction" and Berenice Reynaud's "Impossible Projections," in Reynaud, ed., *The Films of Yvonne Rainer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 1–23, 24–35; Teresa de Lauretis, "Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer," in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 107–26.

16   See also, Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 20.

17   Following Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva suggests that the dialogic word or text appears primarily in autobiography, polemical confessions, and hidden dialogue—generic structures out of which the films of Rainer and Akerman make a privileged stage for articulating the personal and collective dimensions of discourse. "Word, Dialogue and Novel," in *The Kristeva Reader,* ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 44.

18   Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures,* 19.

19   That these two models were adopted respectively by the first and second phases of feminist film is telling. Psychoanalysis precluded the fantasy of an essential self to be uncovered by its workings; how could it posit the notion of a surfacing, albeit topically oriented, collective consciousness? Psychoanalysis becomes mainly a theoretical tool; thematically it helps refine analysis of sexual difference, and structurally it shapes, through its intrinsic anti-essentialism, a critique of transparency.

20   Noel Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who . . . ," 38.

21   As Regis Durand suggests in "On *aphanisis:* A Note on the Dramaturgy of the Subject in Narrative Analysis," "[Though] there are moments when Lacan's description of the 'subversion' of the subject, of its complex strategies of ruptures and displacements, reads like a compendium of 'modernistic' narrative and discursive strategies: . . . feints, snares, an enunciation that renounces itself. . . . The 'modernistic' fiction of the elusive deceitful subject conceals the much more implacable logic of the division and dispersal of the subject, its 'intersubjective distribution' " (in *Lacan and Narration: The Psychoanalytic Difference in Narrative Theory,* ed. Robert Con Davis [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983], 863).

22   See Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 136–37.

23   The excessive use of irony and ambiguity is seen as being ultimately cooptable within a romantic tradition of self-reflection (Gasché, 136–37). The politically void nature of Rainer's flair for juxtaposition and collage is directly addressed by James' analysis of *Film About a Woman Who . . .* (*Allegories of Cinema,* 326–37).

24   Yvonne Rainer, "Journeys from Berlin/1971," script in, Berenice Reynaud, ed., *The Films of Yvonne Rainer,* 151.

25   B. Ruby Rich points how the use of a psychoanalysis session "is redolent with

formal implication." She identifies "the patient's testimony" uncovered by Roy Schafer's analysis with Rainer's handling of narrative and temporality. "Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction," in Reynaud, ed. *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, 18. The bend toward "that idiom of somewhat manic autoanalysis that characterizes life and love in a therapeutically oriented culture" had already been mentioned in Annette Michelson's analysis of *Lives of Performers* in "Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: The Dancer and the Dance," Michelson, *Artforum* 12.6 (February 1974), 32. Likewise Noel Carroll sees Rainer's juxtapositional aesthetics as pervaded with a self-perfection mechanism modeled on psychoanalysis ("Interview with a Woman Who . . . ," 37–68).

26  Andrews, "Bruce Andrews on Yvonne Rainer," *Cinemanews* 79 (Spring 1980), 14.

27  Paul Arthur, "The Desire for Allegory: The Whitney Biennials," in *Motion Picture* 2.1 (Fall 1987), 6–7.

28  See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part Two," in *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 59–80.

29  Serge Leclaire, "La Realité du Desir," in *Sexualité Humaine* (Paris: Aubier, 1970), 245.

30  Georges Bataille quoted by Jean Narboni in "La Quatrième Personne du Singulier (*Je tu il elle*)," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 276 (May 1977), 10.

31  See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Their writings in *The Anti-Oedipus* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), and "Rhizome" in *On The Line* (New York: Columbia University, Semiotext(e), 1983) expand the notions of a collective disseminated enunciation.

32  Michel Foucault's preface to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xiv.

33  Akerman, "*Je tu il elle*" (press release from Unité Trois). Akerman names her films' three parts: "time of subjectivity," "time of the other or Reportage," and "time of relationship."

34  Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

35  Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94.

36  Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94, 95.

37  Victor W. Turner, "Frame Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison, Wis.: Madison Center for Twentieth Century Studies, Coda Press, 1977), 33. Turner notes the use of the subjunctive mood in verbs during the liminal phase, a verbal conjugation open to chance.

38  I borrow this phrase from Jean Narboni's brilliant analysis of the tactics of display in *Je tu il elle* in "La Quatrième Personne du Singulier (*Je tu il elle*)," 9.

39  Akerman, "*Je tu il elle*."

40  I shall refer to Chantal Akerman's presence as a performer by her first name, following the clue of her naming the "Je" in the credits as Julie, the sole name marked out by its fictive anonymity. I'd rather use Chantal instead of Julie to clarify the terms of Akerman's dual presence in the film.

41   Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 43.

42   Roland Barthes comments on the characteristics of a linguistic temporality, elaborating on Benveniste's study on Indo-European languages. He will say that in these languages the system is two-fold: "1, a first system or system of discourse proper, adapted to the temporality of the speaker, whose speech-act is always the point of origin; a second system, of narrative history, appropriate to the recounting of past events, and consequently deprived of future or present, its specific tense being the aorist (or its equivalents, like the French *passé simple*). In view of *Je tu il elle*'s constitution of a liminal identity it is important that the character makes extensive use of this apersonal tense. Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" in *The Rustle of Language,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 14.

43   Narboni, "La Quatrième Personne," 11.

44   Narboni, 11.

45   Narboni, 11.

46   In a brilliant literalization of how writing is significant mostly as a "prop" for Akerman's mise-en scène, Chantal tacks all the pages carefully onto the floor, filling the space between her bed (inactivity) and the camera (her filmmaking activity).

47   Discussing the problematics of confinement in Akerman's work Jacques Polet compares the use of a truck in Marguerite Duras *Le Camion* and in *Je tu il elle.* "It is as if Akerman chose the motif of the truck (defined par excellence . . . for its relation to an external space) to better signal to us, through a sort of absurdist demonstration that her filmic universe is basically structured by the element of enclosure" "La Problematique de l'enfermement dans l'univers filmique de Chantal Akerman," in *Chantal Akerman,* Cahier 1, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas (Brussels: Atelier des Arts, 1982), 176.

48   Thus she avoids facilely representing heterosexuality as "bad," as opposed to the "good" lesbian relationship (Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], 132–33). In "Three Moments toward Feminist Erotics," Fabienne Worth, remarks how without any marks of voyeurism or fetishism, the man becomes the object of the female gaze in the film's second part (paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for Cinema Studies, Montreal, Canada, April 1987).

49   Mayne and Worth both remark on this exception.

50   Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole," 130.

51   Narboni, "Le Quatrième Personne," 7.

52   André Bazin, "La Mort tous les après midi," in *Qu'est ce que le Cinema?,* vol. 1, (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1958), 70.

53   Narboni lists, as elements that announce the film's "closeness to the porn" and to its "ruin," the use of long takes, the amplified noise track, the filmmaker's presence in a homosexual scene, and its corruption of the "glorious eternity of porn sex scenes" by introducing the sex scenes through a laconic commentary in off: "She told me I should leave in the morning." This commentary also "interdicts, . . . all the pathetic connotation attached to the idea of precariousness and fugacity." Narboni, "Le Quatrième Personne," 7.

54   See Narboni, 7.

55   The filmmaker states: "One tends to represent love between women as young adolescents of David Hamilton photographs." Akerman, "*Je tu il elle.*"

56   Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole," 132.

57   Mayne, 130.

58   Akerman, "Entretien Avec Chantal Akerman."

59   Brenda Longfellow. "Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman," in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13.1–2 (1989), 86.

60   Other writings on the film that heavily resort to psychoanalysis are Fabienne Worth's "*Je tu il elle:* Three Moments toward Feminist Erotics"; and Francoise Audé's "Le Cinema de Chantal Akerman, la nourriture, le narcissisme, l'exil," in *Chantal Akerman.* Audé's article is especially heavy-handed in its analysis of the characters' behavior: the "bulimics of sugar" and the "avidity" with which the sandwich prepared by the female lover is eaten "translate a fundamental disequilibrium: that of anorexy." She reads the reference to menstrual period in the film's first part as the start of a normal life after the "amenorreiac" loss of temporal parameters for the character. In this optic the film's third part can only confirm the first part, by having Julie establish her narcissistic complement through a female lover who feeds her. As Judith Mayne remarks in a footnote, Audé's analysis is "instructive" for the overly "developmental" reading of *Je tu il elle* providing "more than a tinge of homophobia." The conclusion of the film "demonstrates" according to Audé, the necessity for separation and departure." Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole," 244.

61   Mayne, 127.

62   Mayne, 133. See Audé, "Le Cinéma de Chantal Akerman."

63   Mayne, 133.

64   Emile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language," in *Critical Theory Since 1965,* ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 730.

65   Benveniste, 730.

66   Narboni, "Le Quatrième Personne," 10–11.

## 5   "Her" and Jeanne Dielman: Type as Commerce

1   Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950), 145.

2   *Mytheme* is a neologism by Fernand Braudel. Following an ethnographic reflection, it refers to historical invariables, elementary traits that persist within the *longue dureé.* As cited by Michel Vovelle in "A História e a Longa duração," in *A História Nova,* ed. Jacques le Goff (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Fontes Editora, 1990), 83.

3   Bazin, in a footnote to "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," in *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 21, 22.

4   Pascal Bonitzer, "Neorealismo, Quale Realismo?" in *Il Neorealismo Cinematografico Italiano: Atti del convegno della X Mostra Internazionale Del Nuovo Cinema,* ed. Lino Miccichè (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1975), 225 (my translation).

5   Likewise, the need for this validation of the working class as protagonist issues from the sense of an impending socialist revolution after World War II.

6   André Bazin, "A Note on *Umberto D,*" in *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, 77.

7   Jean Luc Godard, "One Should Put Everything into a Film," in *Godard on Godard,* 2d ed. ed. Tom Milne (New York: a da Capo Press, 1972), 239.

8   Prendergarst argues that the issue of representativeness and type can indeed be considered a matter of police. His first example is the prosecutor's argument during the trial of *Madame Bovary:* "Flaubert's . . . blasphemous intention lay in the fact that . . . Emma's commingling of religious and erotic feelings . . . could not conceivably be deemed an accurate representation of the psychological condition of girls educated in the French convents." The second is Brecht's account of "his meeting with the official Censor to discuss the suicide incident in the film *Kuhle Wampe. . . .* To Brecht's claim that the episode was based on a documented case, the Censor replied that he had no objection whatsoever to its depiction as an isolated incident; what was not acceptable was the film's implication that the despair the suicide evokes might correspond to a 'typical' state of affairs: as Brecht sardonically concluded: 'He had read us a little lecture on realism. From the stand point of the police'" (*The Order of Mimesis* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 40).

9   Jean Luc Godard. "My Approach in Four Movements," in *Godard on Godard,* 239.

10   Godard, "My Approach in Four Movements," 239.

11   Georg Lukács, "Intellectual Physiognomy," in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays,* ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), 154.

12   Lukács, "Intellectual Physiognomy," 154.

13   Lukács, "Intellectual Physiognomy," 154.

14   Lukács, "Narrate and Describe," in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays,* 131.

15   Lukács, "Narrate or Describe" and "Intellectual Physiognomy" (1936) and Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1967), roughly frame my consideration on the decentering power of description. Consistent in both critics' work is an outrage against what was felt as an antihumanist movement in representation. What seems endangered in the equivalence promoted by description and by literalness is the notion of a center whose homology with subjectivity is perceptively denounced in the theoretical essays on the New Novel. Lukács, in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* and Fried, in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968).

16   See J. L. Godard's "My Approach in Four Movements."

17   Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

18   *Nouvel Observateur* issues 71 and 77 from 29 March and 10 May 1966, reprinted in *L'Avant Scène du Cinéma* 70 (May 1967), 46.

19   From extracts of a dialogue published in *Lettres françaises* on 3 November 1966—"Òu va notre civilisation," *L'Avant Scène du Cinéma* 70.

20   Colin MacCabe, Laura Mulvey, "Images of Woman, Images of Sexuality," in *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics,* ed. Colin MacCabe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 87.

21   MacCabe and Mulvey, 94.

22   Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 73.

23   William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), 39 and 321.

24   Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology,* vol. 1, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 61.

25   Christine Brooke-Rose, "Woman as Semiotic Object," in *The Female Body in Western Culture,* ed. Susan Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

26   Brooke-Rose, 308.

27   John Kreidl, *Jean Luc Godard* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

28   Kreidl, 180.

29   See Kreidl's chapter "Godard, Women and the Metaphor of Prostitution."

30   Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 87.

31   Godard's film stands at that delicate juncture where the reproduction of a "compacted doctrine" can be taken as his acceptance of such a reality (in which case he would be a mythmaker) or as a means of making this represented reality available for critique.

32   Among several others reflecting on the "natural" sign in Godard's films see: Alfred Guzzetti's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her: Analysis of a Film by Godard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Marie-Claire Ropars Wuillemier, "Form and Substance, or the Avatars of the Narrative," in *Focus on Godard,* ed. Royal S. Brown (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972); Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature from D. Quixote to J. L. Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Susan Sontag, "Godard," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

33   Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 59.

34   Barthes, *Roland Barthes,* 59.

35   Barthes, *Roland Barthes,* 59.

36   Barthes, *Roland Barthes,* 59. Barthes goes on to say that "it is . . . the only position which the subject can assume without falling into two inverse but equally abhorrent images: that of the egoist . . . and that of the saint."

37   The image of housewife-hooker as a mythical incarnation of Capital is fed by a series of satellite data: the series of women complaining about their life conditions in a documentary, cinema vérité format certify the myth: its raison d'être (to pass for truth) is verified by the alibi of multiple "witnesses."

38   In this context it is important to rethink how the practical implications of a prostitute's life in Jean Luc Godard's *Vivre sa Vie* (1962) are presented. Godard's treatment of this scene constitutes an acknowledgment of this reality's more complex social register.

39   Jacqueline Aubenas-Bastie, "68–78: Dix ans de Feminisme en Belgique," in *Les Femmes et Leurs Maîtres,* ed. Jacqueline Aubenas-Bastie, with a preface by Maria A. Macciocchi, Séminaire Paris VIII Vincennes (Paris: Christian Bourgois Editeur, 1978), 314–20.

40  See *Les Temps Modernes* 333/334, issue *Les Femmes s'entêtent* (April/May 1974).

41  Nicole, "Les Pommes de Terre," *Les Temps Modernes* 333/334 (April/May 1974): 1732–35.

42  See Marsha Kinder's illuminating analysis in "Film and the Subversive Potential of the Iterative," *Film Quarterly* 43.2 (Winter 1989–90), 8.

43  Akerman, "La Vie, il faut la mettre en scène," interview by Marie-Claude Treillou, *Cinéma* 206 (February 1976), 90.

44  Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), 43.

45  Serge Daney et al., "Une Certaine Tendance du Cinema Français," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 257 (May–June 1975).

46  Eric de Kuyper. "L'Aphasie du Quotidien: (A propos de *Jeanne Dielman*)," *Ça Cinéma* 14 (1st trimester, 1978), 27.

47  de Kuyper, 29.

48  de Kuyper, 29.

49  de Kuyper, 29. Jeanne's social function as a character is to provide a critique of women's role in society. As played by Seyrig, however, Jeanne is meant to question an objectifying cinematic representation. As Akerman states: "They've accused me of degrading her. But it is as a mythical woman that she is degraded. Because there (in other films) one makes a woman-object without confessing. I made a woman object but . . . consciously." Akerman in statements gathered by Marie-Claude Tremois in "A partir de quelques images de mon enfance," *Télérama* 1357 (14 January 1976).

50  Akerman, "La Vie, il faut la mettre en scène," 90. Akerman rebels against another misconception about the housewife type. "Why have I chosen her pretty? Because men always imagine that the women who are at home are ugly. My mother is pretty" (90).

51  Akerman, "A partir de quelques images de mon enfance," 67.

52  Akerman, "A partir de quelques images de mon enfance," 68.

53  Amy Taubin, "A Woman's Tedium," *Soho Weekly News* (25 November 1976), 31. B. Ruby Rich criticized Taubin's "reformist position" which has forced Taubin into a reading of the film "limited by notions of realism that she, as an avant garde critic, would have ordinarily tried to avoid." Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 346.

54  Jonas Mekas as cited by B. Ruby Rich. "Why did she have to ruin the film by making the woman a prostitute and introduce the murder at the end, why did she commercialize it?" Rich, 346.

55  Loader, 338. In response to this sort of comment I quote Akerman: "I never thought 'Oh I'm going to talk about women's alienation.' I had the idea of the story in its totality from the start: I am going to tell that this woman is like this and this, etc. . . . After, when the film was finished, I realized I spoke about women's alienation, something I wouldn't even have thought in the start" (statements collected by José Vieria Marques, in press-book of *Jeanne Dielman* in Festival de Figueira da Foz, Berlin, July 1975).

56  John L. Lyons, *Exemplum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 26, 32.
57  Brenda Longfellow, "Love Letters to the Mother: The Works of Chantal Aker-man," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13.1–2 (1989), 84. John Pym states, "At the end Jeanne registers not as a woman who has finally 'liber-ated' herself by breaking the mould of her life, but rather as a mistery and very probably a deranged mistery" (*Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles,*" *Monthly Film Bulletin* [Great Britain] 46.543 [April 1979], 72).

## 6  Forms of Address: Epistolary Performance, Monologue, and Bla, Bla, Bla

1  Caroline Champetier, "Rencontre avec Chantal Akerman: *Les Rendez-vous D'Anna, Cahiers du Cinéma* 288 (May 1978), 53. Akerman is referring to Del-phine Seyrig's tone as she reads a letter in *Jeanne Dielman.*
2  Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
3  Brenda Longfellow, "Love Letters to the Mother: The Works of Chantal Aker-man," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13.1–2, 1989.
4  Akerman has claimed that the rhythm of her mother's letters is not that of the French language but of Yiddish, and that she tried to keep this rhythm in her reading of the French version of the film. See "Getting Ready for *The Golden Eighties:* A Conversation with Chantal Akerman by Gary Indiana," *Artforum* 21.10 (Summer 1983), 57.
5  Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).
6  Derrida, *The Ear,* 51.
7  Derrida, *The Ear,* 51.
8  See Jaques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and The Closure of Representa-tion," in *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chi-cago Press, 1978.
9  Akerman, in Champetier, "Rencontre avec Chantal Akerman: *Les Rendez Vous D'Anna,*" 54.
10  Akerman, in Champetier, 54.
11  Akerman, in Champetier, 54.
12  In fact this is the same sort of frontality that one sees in classical Hollywood cinema. It is the extension of the monologues, the avoidance of reaction shots, the extreme emphasis on the text and its very content that creates a real differ-ence.
13  Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Mod-ern Literary Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1957), 147. He also states that with the dramatic monologue there is no conclusion, for it lacks the logical completeness of soliloquy and of dialogue. It is in fact only one voice of the dialogue, and no reversal of perspective is, therefore, available (155, 156).
14  Langbaum, 156.
15  Langbaum, 182.
16  Langbaum, 88.
17  Chantal Akerman, "Entretien avec Chantal Akerman," in *Chantal Akerman,* Cahier 1, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas (Brussels: Atelier des Arts, 1982), 14.

18    Akerman, "Entretien avec Chantal Akerman," 14.

19    Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka,* trans. Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 27–28.

## 7    The Rhythm of Cliché: Akerman into the '90s

1    Chantal Akerman, "*Toute une nuit,*" in *Chantal Akerman,* Cahier 1, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas (Brussels: Atelier des Arts, 1982), 179.

2    See Akerman, "Entretien avec Chantal Akerman: Fragments Bruxellois," interview by Alan Philippon, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 341 (1982), 20.

3    Benning's *11 × 14* presents a primarily formal narrative conception: the road's accumulation of ever new sites, ever new events within a series, creates the pretext for a disjunctive narrative. The limited recurrence of characters and the black leader that divides the shots establish the film's tension between a protonarrative and a series.

4    William Uricchio, *Ruttmann's Berlin and the City Film to 1930* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, February 1982), 223.

5    P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 369.

6    Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 211.

7    See E. Richard Sorensen and Allison Jablonski, "Research Filming of Naturally Ocurring Phenomena: Basic Strategies," *Principles of Visual Anthropology,* ed. Paul Hockings (The Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1975), 154.

8    As Catherine Russell points out in a conversation, one cannot overlook the centrifugal connotations of "escape."

9    Marsha Kinder, "The Subversive Potential of the Pseudo-iterative," *Film Quarterly* 43.2 (Winter 1989–90), 15. Kinder's use of Gerard Genette's terminology to account for figures of recurrence (the iterative) or singularity (the singulative), and her analyses of *Toute une nuit*'s strategic opposition to the singulative thrust of conventional narrative, are provocative. Her analysis of Akerman's work alongside two neorealist films also follows a strategy similar to the one I developed in my comparative study of neorealism and Akerman.

10    Kinder, 15.

11    The evidence of *Night and Day* notwithstanding, Akerman's cinema is neither paradoxical nor absurdist. When Julie and Jack start hearing their neighbors' voices, the sounds' echo-quality suggests a representation of subjective imagination that is quite alien to Akerman's usual approach, which creates an unfamiliar reality through a linear, albeit elliptical, realism.

12    When first released in the United States, Akerman's French film *Les Années Quatre Vingts* (The Eighties) was titled *The Golden Eighties* (1983), a mistranslation that created some confusion with her next film's title which was *The Golden Eighties,* an English title for France. The second film from 1986 was then titled *Window Shopping* for distribution in the United States.

13    Akerman, "La Galerie," in *Chantal Akerman,* 116.

14    See Susan Barrowclough, "Chantal Akerman: Adventures in Perception," *Monthly Film Bulletin* (Great Britain) 51 (April 1984), 104.

15  Robert Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 65. Several elements are striking in the parallel between *The Eighties* and the soap opera: the increased scale of the characters in relation to the background, the syntagmatic openness, and the paradigmatic complexity.

16  Allen, 69, 72, 65.

17  Allen, 66.

18  Allen, 70.

19  Allen, 70. See also Charlotte Brunsdon, "Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera," in *Imitations of Life: A Reader of Film and TV Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).

20  See Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge, 1981), 159–74.

21  The film seems to aspire to the borderline status of the dialogue in Jacques Demy's *Lola* (1960). The naming of the protagonist "Lili," and the dissonant chant and dance around this sorceress's name, are only the most blatant clues.

22  See Richard Dyer, "Entertainment as Utopia," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 220–32.

23  See Alain Lacombe, "L'Écran Chanteur," *L'Avant Scène du Cinéma* 369 (March 1988), 4–72.

24  Akerman, "Rencontre avec Chantal Akerman: *Les Rendez Vous D'Anna*," Interview by Caroline Champetier, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 288 (May 1978), 54.

25  I would like to thank David Jacobson for his suggestion that I read Mary Wigman's writings in connection with Akerman's "expressive Jewishness."

26  Mary Wigman, *The Mary Wigman Book: Her Writings*, ed. and trans. Walter Sorell (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 155.

27  Wigman, 156.

28  Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 21.

29  Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 23.

30  Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 22, 23.

31  Akerman, in conversation with the author, January 1987.

32  Akerman, "*Le Manoir* et *Le Domaine*," in *Chantal Akerman*, 143.

33  See Theodor Reik, *Jewish Wit* (New York: Gamut Press, 1962): "Talmudic texts treat punctuation and sentence structure very casually so that a statement can be read in a positive or negative sense, can express an assertion as well as a doubt" (204).

34  *A Filmmaker's Letter* (1984) is another example of Akerman's interest in explaining and presenting her own identity, precisely the issue she holds at bay in other work.

35  *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's "D'Est"* is a multimedia installation programmed for exhibition in the United States, France, Belgium, Germany, and Spain, starting in 1995. The exhibition is the result of a collaboration between the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (Kathy Halbreich and Bruce Jenkins) and the Galerie Nationale du Jeu du Paume in Paris. The financial support for the filmic material to be used in the exhibition was obtained from several European networks, and Akerman traveled to Poland and to East Ger-

many with a small crew in the summer of 1992. One year and two trips later *D'Est* was concluded and premiered to broadcast audiences in Europe and at major international film festivals. Kate Halbreich and Bruce Jenkins, introduction to the exhibit catalog of *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's "D'Est,"* Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1995.

36    Kathy Halbreich and Bruce Jenkins, 8.

37    The project was first mentioned to Akerman in 1989 (Halbreich and Jenkins, 8).

38    Hoberman points to the affinity of Akerman's project with "the more underground American filmmaker Peter Hutton who has made silent "city symphonies" in Budapest, the former Leningrad and Lodz" ("Have Camera, Will Travel," *Premiere* [July 1994], 38).

39    Akerman, quoted in Annick Peigne-Giuly, "Face-à-face avec *L'Est*," *Libération*, 18 September 1993.

40    Akerman as quoted by Peigne-Giuly.

41    Catherine David, *"D'Est:* Akerman's Variations," in *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's "D'Est,"* 58.

42    *Poems of Akhmatova*, trans. Stanley Kunitz with Max Hayward (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown, in association with the Atlantic Monthly Press, 1973), 99.

43    Akerman, press-book for *D'Est*.


## To Conclude: It Is Time

1    The cliché is characterized by being "not only 'detached' [from its context] but also 'frozen' in the time and space from which it originates." Laurent Jenny, "Structure et Fonctions du Cliché: A Propos des *Impressions d'Afrique*," *Poétique: Revue de théorie et d'analyse littéraire* (Paris), 12, 498.

2    See the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 407–8.

3    Eric de Kuyper, "L'Impossible Melodrame," in *Chantal Akerman*, Cahier 1, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas (Brussels: Atelier des Arts, 1982), 120.

4    As Alain Lacombe succinctly puts it, song "translates the presence of the public into the interior of the film's development" ("L'Écran Chanteur," *L'Avant Scène du Cinéma* 369 [March 1988], 5).

5    See Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), chapter 1.

6    For further discussion of Leslie Thornton's magnum opus, see Linda Peckam, "Total Indiscriminate Recall: Peggy and Fred in Hell," *Motion Picture* 3.1–2 (Winter 1989–90). For a discussion of Peggy Ahwesh's mobilization of children's mimicry, see Ivone Margulies, "After the Fall: Peggy Ahwesh's Verité," in the same issue of *Motion Picture.*

7    Given Akerman's feminist allegiances, the affinity between her strategy of hyperrealist cinematic naïveté and the strategy of mimicry advocated by Luce Irigaray is highly suggestive. According to Irigaray, "To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible,' of 'matter'—to

'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the coverup of a possible operation of the feminine in language." Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76. For Mary Ann Doane, "the ability to enact a defamiliarized version of femininity" in the "women's films" of the 1940s is analogous to this strategy; in this respect Doane's notion of "doubling" is also relevant to my understanding of Akerman's distancing tactics. See Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 182.

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