

The embodiment of postmemory: encounters with a family's past in the films of Chantal Akerman

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Abstract

Chantal Akerman felt that Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) was about loss, about nostalgia for the lost ritual of the home. It could be said that, through her films, the director was searching for the truth of the family past that she had never experienced first-hand, but whose imprints she could feel on her body as the daughter of Holocaust survivors. Postmemory is embodied in the director and her films through the transmission of the concentrationary universe in the family unit. At the same time, the things we see can trigger the memories and subjectivities of the viewer that relate the various situations that are encountered. To address these points, I will take a close look at some particularly revealing moments in Akerman's films and apply aesthetic thinking, as well as examining the works of certain feminist theorists from recent decades who have shown a special interest in the body's role in the spectator's experience.

Keywords

Gender studies, Chantal Akerman, Jeanne Dielman, Embodied memory, Postmemory.

Resum

Chantal Akerman apreciava que Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) tractava sobre la pèrdua, sobre la nostàlgia del ritual perdut a la llar. Es podria dir que la directora, amb el seu cinema, buscava la veritat del passat familiar que no va arribar a conèixer directament, però les petjades del qual sent en el seu cos com a filla de Supervivents de l'Holocaust. La postmemòria es materialitza en el cos de la directora i en les seves pel·lícules a partir de la transmissió de l'univers concentracionari al nucli familiar; al mateix temps, el que es mostra pot activar les memòries i les subjectivitats de la persona espectadora en relació amb les diverses realitats oposades. Per abordar aquestes qüestions faré un recorregut per alguns moments especialment reveladors del cinema d'Akerman i em recolzaré en el pensament estètic, així com en algunes teòriques feministes de les últimes dècades especialment interessades pel cos en l'experiència espectral.

Paraules clau

Estudis de gènere, Chantal Akerman, Jeanne Dielman, Memòria encarnada, Postmemòria.

Introduction

Making people feel the unspeakable was at the centre of some of the artistic movements that emerged during the post-war period after the Second World War, in an attempt to preserve the memory and prevent something similar to Auschwitz from ever happening again. Despite the fact that human beings keep repeating such traumatic events in other forms, artistic approaches that allow us to reflect on time and memory also endure or emerge. Chantal Akerman's films are thus capable of stirring a sensory experience that draws our attention to what

would otherwise go unnoticed. The imprint of her family's past as the daughter of Holocaust survivors and the feeling of not belonging pervade the personal exploration that forms the basis of her films. Born in Belgium into a Polish family, she mainly worked in Brussels, Paris and New York, but also made films in other locations such as the Eastern Bloc, Israel and Mexico, as well as spending time in the Middle East.

Her films take on a ritualised quality that connects to her childhood memories, serving as a kind of aesthetic substitute or replacement for the Jewish rituals seen and experienced in her home (Moreno Pellejero, 2023). But they are also a way of

connecting her with the other of herself, which she explores and listens to from her nomadic perspective and which connect with the experiences of various people suffering from present-day conflicts, whom she encounters in the process of making some of her films that are more akin to documentaries. Postmemory is embodied in the director and her films through the transmission of the concentrationary universe in the family unit. At the same time, the things that are shown can trigger the memories and subjectivities of the viewer, connecting with the director's own concerns and with a variety of situations.

I interpret concentrationary as referring to the consequences of the Holocaust that are manifested in everyday life but seemingly go unnoticed, as noted by Griselda Pollock and Maxim Silverman (Pollock and Silverman, 2015: XIII-XIX).¹ Thus, theorists had regarded concentrationary imaginaries as being those images that reflect the normalisation of the past associated with concentration camps or finding the traumatic in the seemingly ordinary. This could be illustrated through certain defamiliarisation techniques in film and the arts that would elicit an interpretation of terror in viewers.

Walter Benjamin referred to the *aura* of an artwork as the unique manifestation of a remoteness, however close at hand, the capacity of art to convey an experience in a unique place and time to the viewer. (Benjamin [1936] 2000: 22). Such thinking was to influence Theodor Adorno when he pondered how art could speak after Auschwitz (Adorno [1966] 1984: 361). Arguably, it was about finding a way to reinvent art. For Adorno, this reinvention could only be achieved by eliciting feelings, without words, without resorting to the explicit; something that, like Benjamin, he found even before Shoah in the work of writers like Marcel Proust or, later, in the theatre of Samuel Beckett, in whose plays nothing ever seemed to happen. In the work of those pioneering artists, the dialogue was maintained between the spectator and the art in an unrepeatable experience (Adorno, 2009). Pollock and Silverman recapture Adorno's paradox that it is only through art that a voice can be found, a voice that expresses the suffering of barbarism (Pollock & Silverman, 2015: XVI).

Akerman would choose to show the little things that accompany a family past linked to trauma, steering clear of sensationalist imagery, adopting the rejection of the idolatry of images, inherent in Jewish thinking (Akerman and Godard [1979/1980] 2020). A way of constructing films about which the author says she has no visual memory, only an emotional one: "I don't remember exact shots, only what they evoked for me" (Akerman and Brenez, 2011). As if she created her films based on feelings, rather than on images or scripts; feelings that stem from her experiences and personal exploration.² Ana Aitana Fernández and Sergi Sánchez referred to the concept of the *symptom* in the sense expressed by Georges Didi-Huberman, as "the essence of the tensions that occur in filmed intimacy", and they saw the link between the symptom of History and intimate spaces as a political gesture. A link between intimacy and history, which in Akerman's films lies in the trauma of the

Holocaust (Sánchez and Fernández, 2016: 84).

In this vein, according to Marianne Hirsch, symptoms would also be the result of the familial and bodily transmission of the traumatic past within a space. Hirsch coined the term *postmemory* for the *living connection* that the children of Holocaust survivors and their peers are able to feel with the memories of the previous generation. She reflects on the aesthetic possibilities after the Holocaust and explores how to continue telling the stories of the victims or how the children of the survivors - she was a daughter herself - bear the consequences of crimes they did not witness; how trauma is remembered by people with no physical experience of it (Hirsch [2012] 2021: 14, 29). Postmemory implies not having experienced the traumatic event first-hand and a generational transfer from the people who did experience it, which sets it apart from one's own, individual memories, which are also shaped by the groups to which we belong.³

In this article, I will take a close look at some particularly revealing moments in Akerman's films in the search of the family past and apply aesthetic thinking and the ideas on memory that emerged after the Second World War. I will also examine the works of certain feminist theorists who in recent decades have paid special attention to the bodily experience of spectators. The aim is to explore these links and ability of Akerman's films to elicit feelings without explicitly saying or showing anything. I will connect the traumatic event that marked Akerman's life and films with others from the present, in particular exile. The director connects and identifies with these traumatic events in her films and does so from a personal perspective. While deterritorialisation implies a displacement from one territory to another, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, it also leads to an expansion of bodies - inherent to the nomadic subjects that I will discuss - where bodies meet and merge with others, forming new connections and destabilising fixed structures (Deleuze & Guattari [1980] 2002; Braidotti [1994] 2000).

I will begin by examining the concentrationary universe of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (C. Akerman, 1975), I will see how the past manifests itself in the present through embodied memory in *Demain on déménage* (2004), or how this postmemory of an event that the director has not experienced herself but which she carries in her body can be linked to conflicts such as that faced by Mexicans who cross the border into the United States clandestinely in *De l'autre côté* (2002). This would also be present when Akerman traced her Polish roots in the countries of the East after the fall of the Berlin Wall in *D'Est* (1993), when she filmed the racial problems of the American South in *Sud* (1999), or when the problems of the Middle East pervade the mixed feelings provoked by Israel in *Là-bas* (2006) - this theme was also present in a project on the three monotheisms that she did not complete. She said that she felt at home in Palestine and recalled that in Syria she had learned to overcome the fear of orientalism that had been instilled in her as a Jew.

The concentrationary

When Akerman talks about Jeanne Dielman, she stresses the importance of her search for lost rituals and Jewish heritage, from which her and Jeanne's anxiety stemmed. In "The Pajama Interview" with Nicole Brenez, Chantal says that after the loss of her paternal grandfather, she wanted her mother to keep the tradition of the Sabbath and light the candles as is customary at the beginning and end of this day of the week, devoted to rest and prayer (Akerman & Brenez, 2011). *Jeanne Dielman* was born out of a desire to connect with this and understand her mother's silences, containing moments in which the presence of the Holocaust is explicitly manifested. The director also portrays the seclusion of the female lead, a woman who repeatedly performs household chores throughout the three days of her life that are shown in the film. A film that was made by a team of women in the 1970s to claim that they were capable of exercising any cinema-related profession.

The first of the three days of Jeanne Dielman's life begins in a kitchen. A wide shot shows a space in which a table practically occupies the centre of the frame. On the left side, we can see Jeanne, a middle-aged woman, boiling water on a cooker. We do not see a close-up of her face, and her gestures are reminiscent of an automaton, rigorously carrying out household chores. Yet the contained movements of her body are in contrast to the seamless way in which Jeanne is performing her household chores (Picture 1). This could echo the discrepancy between the feeling of emptiness in real lives and the romanticised image of perfect mothers and wives that appeared in American magazines and the media fifteen years after the end of World War II, as noted by Betty Friedan ([1963] 2009: 47). This theorist compared the way American women in the 1950s and 1960s adapted to being "simple housewives" with the dehumanisation of prisoners in camps, who were forced to abandon their own interests and to perform endless, monotonous tasks following

Picture 1. Jeanne Dielman doing housework in the first shot of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce*



Source: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (C. Akerman, 1975).

the rhythm of machines or the needs of other people (Friedan [1963] 2009: 368-369).

While we are watching Jeanne Dielman in the kitchen, we hear a doorbell ring. Then, Jeanne unbuttons her apron and dries her hands. She then moves out of the frame and leaves the kitchen, but not before switching off the light in the room. After she leaves, the frontal shot of the room remains, now with the light off, while we hear a door open, followed by the off-camera voice of a man and Jeanne greeting each other. The shot remains in the kitchen, concealing something that we sense from what we hear, without knowing exactly what it might be. We then see them enter Jeanne's bedroom from the hallway, where the static camera remains as darkness falls, until they both leave the room (Picture 2).

Picture 2. Jeanne leaving the bedroom and switching on the hall light, alongside the man we had seen enter with her in the static shot



Source: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (C. Akerman, 1975).

After Jeanne says goodbye to the man, she returns to the kitchen, where she had left potatoes boiling in a pot, and we watch as she finishes preparing them for dinner: firstly checking that they are ready and that the cooker can be turned off and then placing them in a bain-marie, after draining them. This process is shown in a static, frontal shot that lasts for about 1 minute and 23 seconds, the time spanning Jeanne's daily activity and experienced by the viewer. The robot-like stiffness of her body and repetitiveness of Jeanne's daily gestures and movements bring to mind the repetitiveness of the concentration camps. Marguerite Duras recalled death on a mass scale, the seriality of human beings' names being lost and replaced by numbers (Duras, 1985). Jeanne Dielman's robot-like gestures and contained movements are in turn linked to the self-control that would be expected of a mother and housewife in the Jewish tradition, which become evident in the repetition of everyday actions with small variables that punctuate the film's slowly evolving plot.

Every night, Jeanne has a brief conversation with her son before going to bed (Picture 3). The first time, he asks his mother how she met his father, as he has just read the word

Picture 3. Every night Jeanne has a nightly conversation with her son



Source: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (C. Akerman, 1975).

“miracle” and it reminds him that his aunt Fernande always said it was a miracle that she had met Jack. Jeanne replies: “yes, he came in 1944 to liberate us”. Jeanne’s story continues: “They tossed chewing gum and chocolates at us, and we threw flowers to them. I met your father after the Americans had left. I was living with my aunts, because my parents were dead”. Jeanne seems to be trying to play down her words and does not dwell on them, although there is some tension in her face.

The Liberation to which Jeanne refers is reminiscent of an incident that Akerman described to Brenez. She remarked that her mother was interned in a concentration camp when she was 15 years old, manufacturing battle supplies. An elderly woman looked after her aunts and mother and would save them some bread to keep them alive. During the death march, when the Nazis saw that they were flanked by the Americans and Russians, they emptied the camps and made the prisoners walk barefoot, or with paper wrapped around their feet. Her mother fainted and her aunts helped her by chewing her food so she could eat. Finally, they were saved by French soldiers who overheard them speaking French, lent them their coats and took them to the Bremen Bridge on the American side. They accompanied them to the hospital and fed them bite by bite, which saved them, as many people died because they started eating too quickly (Akerman and Brenez, 2011). Akerman likens this incident with a passage from Maurice Blanchot’s *The Infinite Conversation* ([1969] 2008), in which the thinker sees the world as a huge graveyard, a counterpoint to the beauty and heroism of nomadism. Akerman then goes on to question the need for heroism (Akerman and Brenez, 2011).

This double prison, i.e. the camps and the one Jeanne has subsequently created for herself as a woman, is conveyed by Akerman through the character’s restrained gestures and the virtual absence of speech, the kind of prison inhabited by the family women from her mother’s generation. Her mother had a number on her arm, but she never spoke of it. Akerman, however, recalled dreaming every night about the camps and

Hitler seated in a big chair, when she was only three years old (Akerman and Kasman, 2015). Hirsch observed that daughters identifying with their mothers had led second-generation artists to seek ways to pass on the physical memory of trauma without harming themselves or retraumatising the memory (Hirsch [2012] 2021: 127). Akerman felt that she had to talk about it because her mother would not say anything, she felt that she had to bear that testimony for her. However, the director recounted that on one occasion, when she presented her film *La Folie Almayer* (2011) in Mexico, after the screening, her mother had told her that while she had her films, she, Natalia, only had Auschwitz. This made her realise that her mother alone could speak about this and, if she had decided not to, then so be it (Akerman and Kasman, 2015).

The past in the present

In Akerman’s search for her family past, you can sense something of the Proustian reminiscences that run through the ritualised form of Proust’s writing of which Akerman is a great student and interpreter. In such reminiscences, something of the present evokes the past which manifests itself, in a different form, in the random moment of remembrance. In one of his courses, Gilles Deleuze refers to *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) and regards reminiscences as contaminations of instants at separate intervals, where moments from the distant past and the present can collide, regardless of the time distance that separates them (Deleuze, 1983). Evocations of the past can be seen in the connections that emerge between the images captured by Akerman and her family’s past. In turn, the memory evoked by Proust’s madeleine led to the creation of a succession of stories, reminiscences that shaped his work *In Search of Lost Time*, just as Akerman was in search of family time, some of which she did not experience herself, but which helped to shape her present.⁴

This could be seen in the same vein as Didi-Huberman’s interpretation of time and history in Benjamin’s dialectical image. An image that makes things visible and, at the same time, dazzles, for «its possible appearance shows the essential form of the possible link between the Now (instant, lightning) and the Past Time (latency, fossil), a link whose traces will be preserved by the Future (tension, desire). In this sense, Benjamin defines the image as “dialectics at a standstill”» (Benjamin [1982] 2005; Didi-Huberman [2000] 2006: 152). A standstill that Didi-Huberman regards as a caesura, where there is a momentary stillness in the course of the unfolding movement (Didi-Huberman [2000] 2006). Benjaminian time was in turn influenced by Proustian involuntary memory; Proust’s madeleine that evokes his childhood in the present, which in the future is added to Didi-Huberman’s interpretation on the path to the conception of anachronistic time, in which such traces will follow.

Giving her mother a voice through film is also one of Akerman’s great quests. In *Demain on déménage* there is a particularly sad moment when mother and daughter are moved by the discovery

and sight of the journal or *Tagebuch* that the grandmother, called Tosca or Tocha in fiction and Sidonie in real life, wrote in 1920. The mother reads an extract in which the grandmother, murdered in Auschwitz at the age of forty, refers to herself as a woman. She reads, feeling touched, and when she finds her self-portrait in the pages of the journal, she remembers how magnificent her mother, once an artist, was (Picture 4). The boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred by a narrative that mixes elements of a more classical tradition, such as the use of close-ups, with elements frequently found in the filmmaker's work, such as the sustained period of time while the journal is discovered.

Picture 4. An intimate moment between Charlotte and her mother upon finding the journal of her grandmother who died at Auschwitz



Source: *Demain on déménage* (C. Akerman, 2004). Courtesy Les Poissons Volants.

In her essay *Le frigidaire est vide. On peut le remplir*, Akerman transcribes her mother's translation into French of the Polish words found in her grandmother's original journal:

"I am a woman! Therefore, I cannot express all my desires and thoughts out loud. I can only suffer in secret. So, to you, my journal, I would at least like to be able to tell you some of my thoughts, my desires, my sufferings and my joys, and I am sure that you will never betray me, as you are my only confidant!" (Akerman, 2004: 68).

With great emotion, Akerman described how her mother had finally shed a tear when she saw this film, identifying with the character played by Aurore Clément (Akerman, 2004: 73). Drawing on Bracha Ettinger's notion of art as a "transport-station of trauma", Pollock regards the grandmother's journal in the film as a medium that connects with the mother's trauma and helps to transform the traces imprinted on her after the catastrophe (Pollock, 2013: 218; Ettinger, 2020: 330). In the installation entitled *Marcher à côté de mes lacets dans une frigidaire vide* (2004) images of the conversation between Chantal and her mother Natalia about the *Tagebuch* are projected on a double screen, which editor Claire Atherton interprets, from the grandmother's point of view, as a conversation between daughter

and granddaughter through the mother, when Akerman hands the journal to Natalia, asking her to read it and translate it from Polish (Atherton and Roma, 2023: 16).

The conversation was recorded as part of the *making of Demain on déménage* and it was edited by Atherton. They then showed it on two old black and white televisions and filmed it again, seeking to capture the breath of the image. They then constructed a triptych by adding a tulle, onto which the grandmother's paintings and the beginning of the journal were projected (Picture 5), followed by a short letter from Natalia to her mother asking her to protect her, to which Chantal and her sister Sylvaine replied with a letter to their mother written in Polish (Atherton and Roma, 2023: 16). In both *Demain on déménage* and the installation entitled *Marcher à côté de mes lacets dans une frigidaire vide*, Akerman creates a way station to release the mother's trauma, at least momentarily.

Picture 5. Intimate moment between Chantal and her mother with her grandmother's journal



Source: *Marcher à côté de mes lacets dans une frigidaire vide* (C. Akerman, 2004). Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Laura U. Marks revisits Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory* to explore the idea that memory, both cultural and individual, can draw on the senses and be enacted in bodily sensations in a physical and mental process that requires the participation of the viewer in "attentive recognition" of what they are seeing on the screen (Marks, 2000: 123-124). Memories are inscribed on objects, evoking the physical experience of the senses associated with them (Marks, 2000: 201). In Akerman's film, the grandmother's *Tagebuch* moves towards a haptic experience of the characters, as do the senses. The smell of a flat visited by Charlotte, to be used as a studio, reminds her of Poland; conversely, the smell of the house she is moving out of with her mother evokes the past and memories of nature in a young pregnant woman who is interested in buying it. The smell of the burnt chicken prepared by her mother that night makes Charlotte unable to eat it, as it evokes the memory of the grandmother she has never known, memories and nature; and the smell of the house that the mother and daughter visit in the countryside evokes sadness in Charlotte (Moreno Pellejero, 2023: 267).

For Marks, smells are evidence that the memory process is both cerebral and emotional, something she especially associates with the smell of spices in some Middle Eastern films (Marks, 2000: 125). According to this theorist, smells are associated with different cultures, which the memory mimics, recognises and recreates when it sees them recalled in a film (Marks, 2000: 125). This sense of smell may be elicited in viewers of Akerman's film during the dinner scene in the living room by the thickness of the smoke in the shot of the burnt chicken. Something that would awaken the "embodied memory" in the senses described by Marks, a memory that does not belong to a single individual, but is cultural (Marks, 2000: XIII-XIV). The collectivity of memory is reflected when the old man showing Charlotte the study - a place where she is seeking peace and quiet to write - smells Poland, as does Charlotte (Picture 6).

Picture 6. The smell of a studio reminds Charlotte of Poland



Source: *Demain on déménage* (C. Akerman, 2004). Courtesy Les Poissons Volants.

This embodied memory can be likened with Hirsch's emphasis on the corporeal and psychic effects of postmemory wounds (Hirsch [2012] 2021: 57-58). This thinker feels the sense of trauma symbolised by the mark on the skin of the victims of the Holocaust. A mark that a second-generation daughter might feel on her own skin as she identifies with her mother (Hirsch [2012] 2021: 45). These marks could be inscribed in the bodily experience of the daughters of survivors, much as Charlotte recalls the smell of Poland without ever having experienced it herself. The historian Pierre Nora saw memory as something that is embodied in living groups and is in constant movement, like a blurred memory (Nora [1984] 2008: 200). By this, Nora meant "places of memory" in a material, symbolic and functional sense that could encompass a variety of elements (Nora [1984] 2008: 33).

In *Demain on déménage*, the journal, spaces and smells that are associated with the family past could be regarded as places of memory. Places of memory in the director's innermost being, much as the Proustian madeleine was for the writer. Two distant moments are united by the evocative or accelerating element – to use Deleuze's word (Deleuze, 1983) –, which shifts between the present moment and the past instant, in a tangible, formal

leap in the internal time of the characters who, in turn, set in motion the internal time of Akerman's mother in the memory of the past, which now becomes, albeit differently, present in her own experience.

Proximity mapping

Based on her own life and experiences related to her family's past, Akerman establishes a relationship of proximity in her encounters with others, through the distance from which she captures the people filmed in her wide shots over prolonged periods of time. Catherine Russell applied the notion of *autoethnographies* to experimental films that are based on a first-person perspective, and which can form part of microcultures, historical processes or broader social issues (Russell, 1999). This theorist linked autoethnography with the way in which filmmakers capture the first-person experience of the otherness of reality, creating works that can form part of the cultural memory of a particular moment in history (Russell, 1999; Moreno Pellejero, 2021: 54).

Jan and Adeila Assmann studied this cultural memory, a memory that focuses on fixed points in the past and is preserved through rituals, festivals, or myths –and in this case films– helping to form a collective identity through which cultural practices are preserved (Assmann, J. [1992] 2011). In turn, this memory engages with individual memory, in which the boundaries between the inside and outside of the mind are blurred, where the body reinforces memories through the power of affect (Assmann, A. [1999] 2021). In Akerman's films, the cultural and collective memory of other people is constructed from a first-person perspective in order to connect with the other self. Otherness is reversed in Akerman's first-person approach, engendering a respectful understanding of the person being portrayed and his or her experiences, usually associated with the deterritorialisation with which the director identified.

As an ethnographer, Akerman rekindles a kind of involuntary Proustian memory that she has not experienced first-hand, but which she feels in her body as the daughter of survivors. In *De l'autre côté*, the gap formed by the fence separating the United States from Mexico, filmed in sideways tracking shots, or the night-time surveillance of a Border Patrol camera monitoring clandestine Mexican immigrants crossing the desert at night, are in stark contrast to the hospitality of the Mexican families who welcome Akerman into their home (Picture 7). A mother who has lost her son (Picture 8), another who has not heard from his brother since he crossed to the other side, or the man who lost his son after the paid guide abandoned his group in the desert. On the US side, a local couple believes that Mexicans bring smallpox with them.

Theorist Anita Leandro recalls that in the summer of 2002 the Israeli government erected a 700 km barrier in the West Bank under the pretext of curbing terrorist attacks in Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory, which was the same year that

Picture 7. The Border Patrol camera monitors illegal migrants from Mexico crossing the desert on their way to the United States



Source: *De l'autre côté* (C. Akerman, 2002).

Picture 8. A Mexican mother describes losing her son when he crossed into the United States



Source: *De l'autre côté* (C. Akerman, 2002).

Akerman filmed the US-Mexico border in the middle of the desert between Agua Prieta and Douglas. The researcher associates the two borders with Akerman's diametrically opposed stance to Zionist geopolitics and its drive for territorial expansion (Leandro, 2018). While filming the wall at night in *De l'autre côté*, Akerman and her crew came across a group of eight people crossing the desert after being abandoned by their guide; the team provided them with accommodation, food and drink. One scene shows the group eating together; at that moment, a man thanks them for their kind gesture and reads out something he has written about the reasons why someone might decide to cross the border clandestinely (Picture 9).

Like Emmanuel Levinas, the director places herself on the side of otherness, regarding the other as the face for which something can be given without imposing oneself, with the face being the place where the human essence can be reclaimed (Levinas [1961] 2002: 232). We are brought closer to these people by the prolonged periods she spends capturing their faces. This

Picture 9. A man from a group trying to cross the border reads about why a person might decide to cross it



Source: *De l'autre côté* (C. Akerman, 2002).

proximity is also reflected in the distance created by the wide shots that respect their privacy, taking us, the spectators, to an alien place where we can listen to the stories of the people we encounter. (Moreno Pellejero, 2024: 183). Other here means someone other than the director or the viewer, and a subject for him or herself; likewise the other is also in the filmmaker herself or in the viewers from an external point of view, while they are subjects for themselves.

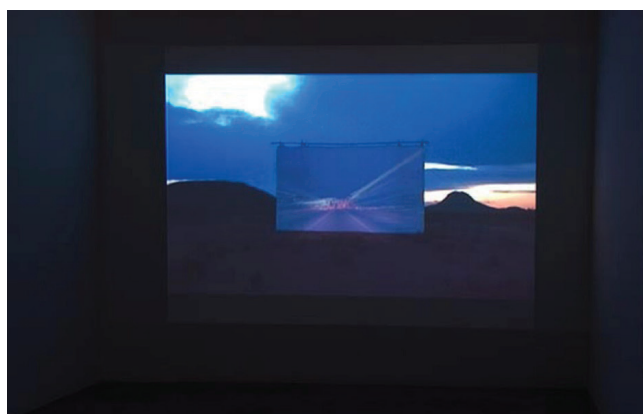
At the end of the film, a frontal tracking shot of a highway shows the road to Los Angeles from inside a car, while Sonia Wieder-Atherton's cello and Akerman's voiceover tell the story of David and his mother, who left for the United States, the former in search of the latter. The footage from the Border Patrol's camera monitoring Mexicans crossing into the United States and the final shot of the road are both reused in Akerman's installation entitled *Une voix dans le désert* (2002). The director set up a ten-metre screen between American and Mexican mountains on the border in the Arizona desert, where she projected these images, one on the front and the other on the back, depending on the side of the border from which the screen was being viewed.

The screening took place outdoors for 8 hours and 8 nights, where Akerman's narration alternated successively between Spanish and English with a strong French accent. As the sequences and readings are repeated, time marches on in the Arizona desert in which the installation stands, shifting from the darkness of night, to the dawn, to the light of early morning; creating an impressionistic work in real time for anyone who stands before this ephemeral piece, the sharpness of the image fading as the day unfolds. While in the opening images shot from the car, the road looks like a crossing that joins the two sides of the border and recedes into the background of the desert, as the image blurs with the first rays of sunlight, the white screen becomes clearer and the wall, where the stories of the Mexican families have been lost, grows ever more present. The Mexican border may be redolent of other present-day walls and conflicts.

Once filmed, this footage was included in the installation entitled *From the Other Side* (2002), which consisted of three

pieces: the first was a video monitor showing the final sequence of the film, the second consisted of eighteen monitors showing various shots from the film, and the third was a recording of the large-screen projection of *Une voix dans le désert* (Picture 10). Rosi Braidotti had used the concept of *nomadic subjects* to refer to subjects who were able to expand their thinking in the affirmation and recognition of their identities and differences (Braidotti [1994] 2000).

Picture 10. A screen in the desert showing the road to Los Angeles while Akerman's voiceover tells the story of a family in the installation *Une voix dans le désert* (2002)



Source: Third piece of *From the Other Side* (C. Akerman, 2002). Fondation Chantal Akerman and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Nomadic subjects emphasise the need for action, at the various levels of identity, of subjectivity and of differences (Braidotti [1994] 2000: 189-202). The nomadic subject implies a shifting and expanding capacity to “become”, in constant change. This thinker recognises the movement of nomadic subjects by affirming the positive nature of difference, in its multiplicity and continuous transformation, relinquishing fixed identities “in favour of a flow of multiple becomings” (Braidotti [1994] 2000: 131). The movement and expansion of nomadic subjects is also present in Akerman's personal cinema, in her searches for her family's past or in the affirmation of her sexuality, and also in her prominent position as a female filmmaker. Like the nomadic subjects theorised by Braidotti, Akerman is in a constant state of movement and expansion, connecting her to the people she encounters in her films about exiles and, in turn, to her viewers through her films.

A physiological postmemory that becomes collective

It could be said that Akerman's films are the materialisation of the postmemory of what the director feels in her body and is seeking to understand, that which has been transmitted to her through the gestures of the women she has seen in her childhood, the objects, the silences, the spaces and smells she encounters and which evoke that past that manifests itself in her present. That past can become the concentrationary or the movement of deterritorialisation that we, the people on the other side of the screen, can live from our own experiences.

Influenced by Bergson's ideas and reflections on the subject, and by psychological and philosophical experiments in the early 19th century that considered vision to be a physiological effect whose perception would be subjective in nature, predating the interest in “embodied spectatorship” or “haptic visuality”, Marks believes that memory materialises in the senses (Bergson [1896] 1949: 109; Marks, 2000: 123). The senses are awakened in Akerman's films by the extended shots as we observe Jeanne Dielman's mechanical and restrained gestures as she carries out household chores, by the grandmother's journal and the smells in *Demain on déménage*, or by the stories told in *De l'autre côté*. These elements are woven into Akerman's films, achieving a ritual-form, capable of awakening a physical memory from the past, not only the past that the director has experienced, but also the past that she has not lived first-hand, but which is latent in her present, much as it will be in her future. The ritual-form of her films creates a medium that stirs the physiological memories of her audience, which are evoked by what is shown on the screen and how it relates to our own life experiences, generating a kind of collective and subjective postmemory at the same time.

Marks relates the evocation of the senses triggered by memory to the concept of *mimesis*; however, rather than viewing it as imitation in the manner of the Greek philosophers, she is closer to Benjamin's way of thinking, seeing it as something that awakens the material presence of the other, in a relationship of indexicality –related to a state of affairs– rather than in an iconic relationship –based on similarity– (Marks, 2000: 115). By this, Benjamin is referring to the capacity of nature and, especially, of human beings to produce similarities, as occurs in the mimetic behaviour that the philosopher observes in children's play, where the child not only imitates other people, but can also imitate a train or a windmill (Benjamin [1933] 2007: 213-214).

Marks' interest in *mimesis* is also influenced by Bergson, who believed that through the repetition of certain brain phenomena, old perceptions could be prolonged, leading to the possibility of memories returning in the present moment (Bergson [1896] 1949: 254), and by Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* ([1946] 1996), for whom *mimesis* requires a response and a dynamic relationship between the listener or reader and the story or text; so every time the story is retold, the senses recreate it in the body of the listener/reader (Marks, 2000: 111-116). Thus, *mimesis* is linked to the representation of the detail of an object in such a way that it can transmit a sensation that transcends the screen and enters the viewer's body, who remembers the bodily sensation produced by what he or she is seeing and recognises, reawakening that sensation through a physical memory, which Marks particularly associates with the experience of touch (Marks, 2000: 111-115). This notion of *mimesis* being linked to the flow of the senses and memories in a dynamic movement creates a new experience for spectators when viewing the film –with *mimesis* no longer regarded as a mere copy of reality–.

This physical experience of memory is in line with the

postmemory of the second generation of survivors theorised by Hirsch ([2012] 2021). In what she calls “memory structures”, Hirsch argues that people less directly affected by trauma can connect with the postmemory generation. (Hirsch [2012] 2021: 66). Second-generation literature, art, autobiographies or testimonies may seek to depict “the lasting effects of what it means to live closely with the grief, depression and dissociation experienced by survivors of impending historical trauma”, which may be further explored through a series of mediating structures and connect with people who are not themselves part of the second generation (Hirsch [2012] 2021: 61, 64).

Akerman's films can thus serve as a kind of place of memory, to borrow Nora's term ([1984] 2008: 33), both for people who have a family link to the trauma of the Shoah and for those who are touched by it because it affects the community in which they live, even if they have not suffered it themselves. In turn, these places allow the spotlight to be shone on spaces commonly forgotten by scholars of history, thinking or memory structures that are often “masculinised”. Here, domestic spaces and the commonplace also become enclaves of memory that stem from that which is private and are inscribed in Akerman's films and their ritual forms through which experiences are transmitted to the viewers. For viewers who keep watching Akerman's films, things that are not visible to the naked eye can become visible, connecting with the traumatic past for a moment in the present; showing us a sensitive perspective that is also political in its relationship of proximity through the distance that is created from the people who we see; in the physical experience that awakens the memory of our own experiences, what we can identify with or the encounter with the diversity of ourselves.

Endnote

This research was awarded first prize in the 35th CAC Awards for research in audiovisual communication.

Notes

1. Pollock and Silverman used the term *concentrationary* put forward by Jean Cayrol, a surrealist poet and political deportee to Mauthausen, to refer to a new art form born out of the experiences in concentration camps. They explored it again in the project *Concentrationary Memories* and the *Politics of Representation*, with which they set out to rethink the relationship between different aesthetic and political movements that emerged after the Second World War, when images of the German concentration camps surfaced and the testimonies of some of the survivors were uncovered. Theorists also note that the term *concentrationary* was coined by David Rousset, a political deportee from Buchenwald, who examined the system of the *concentrationary universe*, something that Hannah Arendt further explored in her analysis of the “demon” in 1951, one of the after-effects of that universe. They also drew on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Paul Virilio, who suggested that the camp and the war were matrices of post-war society, whose cultural forms and subjectivities were symptomatic of the concentrationary imaginary. See Pollock, G. and Silverman, M. (2015). *Concentrationary Imaginaries: Tracing Totalitarian Violence in Popular Culture*. London, New York. I. B. Tauris, pp. XIII-XIX.
2. Studies on Akerman's films link memory to the experience of family trauma and the director's Jewish origins, without going so far as to explore the question of memory and postmemory. The monographs by Iyonna Margulies (1996), Veronica Pravadelli (2000) and Renata Otero (2007) stand out. Additionally, the theorist Griselda Pollock (2013) links memory with objects and the possibilities provided by art to connect with trauma, which she observes in Akerman's *Demain on déménage* (2004). For her part, Anita Leandro (2017) highlighted the Belgian director's ability to create her own memory through her films. Similarly, in a comparative analysis between *Demain on déménage* and the installation entitled *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide*, produced by Akerman in 2004, the researcher Maud Jacquin (2004) highlights the porosity of the narrative in both works, which transforms the dominant conceptions of storytelling, identity and memory.
3. Maurice Halbwachs ([1968] 2004) saw collective memory as a social phenomenon, since individual memory and memories based on individual experiences are influenced by the teaching received from the groups to which we belong, to which we may be linked by family, religion, social class or a particular community. This in turn helps to build people's identity, culture and history. Meanwhile, Paul Ricoeur ([2000] 2003) questioned how something that is absent is represented in the present. In an effort to answer this question, he observes abuses of memory through commemorations that impose remembrance. He also explores the threefold attribution of memory: “to self, to close relations, and to distant others” (p. 193). In this context, the theorist postulates a politics of just memory based on responsible and ethical remembrance, and also considers the possibility of an eventual right to be forgotten.
4. At a conference where she was invited to talk about Proust's influence on her films, Akerman recalled how her cousin always talked about Proust whenever she visited the family in Brussels. Akerman first read Proust at the age of 15, initially reading “The Prisoner”, volume 5 of *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust [1927] 1980). Reading this had a profound impact on her, as it introduced her to the world of homosexuality and class relations at a time when she was unable to talk about it.

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