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Ageless: Akerman's Avatars

Jenny Chamarette

Chantal Akerman was only 18 when she made her first short film, *Saute ma ville*. The figure of the young woman, played by Akerman, radically and violently disrupts the domestic space of her apartment, transgressing all of the domestic meticulousness later portrayed in elongated detail in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* from 1975. Of all the films of Akerman that I have watched, this angry, young, singing woman returns to me over and over again. In this vision, there is so much farcical, explosive, rabid anger: a mercurial state of self-rebellion that burns under the surface of many of Akerman's other images. *Saute ma ville's* English title is *Blow Up My Town*. But in fact, the film does not portray an act of mass urban destruction. It is instead a small, radical act of self-annihilation by a young woman whose gestures still betray a little of her gauche, awkward adolescent body. In the black leader of the end of the film, the young woman's last self-destructive act isn't even visible. The sound of an explosion is all that is left, followed by her triumphant, tuneless singing. Akerman kills off the figure of the young woman aged 18, in 1968. The very first film she ever makes is a shadow of her own death. It is a significant overstep to make any comparison between this baroque, rebellious, raging representation in *Saute ma ville*, and the circumstances of her actual death, aged 65, in October 2015, when she took the decision to end her own life. But perhaps there is another way of seeing it. The figure-avatar of the young woman floats through very many of Akerman's films. This ageless figure stands in, over and over, for Akerman, whose own body will now age no further, since to age one must be alive, still changing, still moving. Ageing is a sign of life, even though at the same time it portends mortality. Ageing is in a sense, the opposite of death, even as it draws

death nearer. Agelessness, as an ambivalent form of cinematic resistance, is what I see again and again in Akerman's work, which flies from and is drawn to forms of selfhood.

Throughout her life, Chantal Akerman was a writer, photographer and installation artist. She also made films, for which she is most widely celebrated and commonly known. There is a particular temptation to claim only one type of creative space for women artists, to deny their polymorphic creative pursuits. As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock pointed out in 1981, Art History (and its compatriot discipline, Film Studies) has an overwhelming tendency to categorize, deflect and narrow the production of art by women. This in itself is more a result of the ideological structures of knowledge production than a definition of those women making art.[1].As a scholar of women artists, I have found it tempting and confusing in equal measure to describe Akerman as a filmmaker like Agnès Varda (except that they are both photographers, writers, documentarists, installation artists); Shirin Neshat as an installation artist (though she too is a painter, photographer and filmmaker) and Marina Abramović as a performance artist (though she is also a filmmaker, transmedia star and latent celebrity). The works these artists leave behind are more complex than a singular summary of their parts: they are multiple, transmedial, interpersonal. They blur lines between self and subject, suffused with emotion and a sense of corporeality. And writing about women artists itself is a precarious double act: their writing, per se, becomes part of their creative complexity, and it intertwines with mine as a writer-scholar. That creative complexity is what I work with and respond to: adding my own voice to theirs, I seek out patterns that may or may not become lines of thought for me, a woman writer, to

[1]Rozsika Parker, and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: IB Tauris, 2013 [1981]), p. xxvi-xxviii, p. 1-14, p. 169-70

follow. For me, writing is not an act of literature, but an act of art. Artmaking is therefore polyvalent, refractory, and resistant.

The question of ageing, and agelessness, is both self-evident, and difficult to reconcile with the figure of Akerman, given her early passing. It is also surprisingly difficult to resolve with my own work. Two of the figures whom I most admire, Agnès Varda and Louise Bourgeois, one living, one dead, are and were active into their ninth and tenth decades. Their meditations on ageing are different too: Varda considers her own body as a site of auto-ethnographic interrogation, particularly in her well-known film, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000), and most recently the limitations of her vision and memory come to the fore in her collaboration with the global street artist and photographer JR in *Visages Villages* (*Faces Places*, 2017). Bourgeois became an artist aged 50: ageing for her gave an emotional force that propelled her to analyse, over and over, and thereby to survive the rage she felt for her own familial relations. And familial relations are at the heart of this chapter, but not, as has so often been explored with relation to Akerman, with regard to the figure of the mother, whose ageing body and sudden decline are depicted with such painful clarity in Akerman's last film, *No Home Movie* (2015). This chapter instead turns to issues of daughterhood, intersubjectivity and the refusal of ageing, which resonate throughout Akerman's films and writing, whether or not Akerman herself is visible within the frame.

Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist phenomenology examines ageing as another lived experience that differentiates the expressions of power between men and women. For Beauvoir, old age is a diminishment of power in as much as it is also a phenomenon that brings to the surface the instability of life, and which therefore challenges the assumption that ageing is a slow-moving form of death:

> La vieillesse n'est pas un fait statique c'est l'aboutissement et le prolongement d'un processus. En quoi celui-ci consiste-t-il? Autrement dit, qu'est-ce que vieillir? Cette idée est liée à celle de changement. Mais la vie de l'embryon, du nouveau-né, de l'enfant est un changement continu. Faut-il en conclure comme l'ont fait certains que notre existence est une mort lente? Assurément non. Un tel paradoxe méconnait l'essentielle vérité de la vie; elle est un système instable où à chaque instant l'équilibre se perd et se reconquiert: c'est l'inertie qui est synonyme de mort. La loi de la vie, c'est de changer. C 'est un certain type de changement qui caractérise le vieillissement; irréversible et défavorable, un déclin.[2]

Unceasing change, then is also part of age and ageing, as much as it is part of every day that is lived: the difference is the power differential which asserts that ageing is a process of decline. Perhaps it is a fault in my own thinking that I see ageing as a cumulative source of critical reflection among many others, inseparable from other cultural, social and embodied indicators of change. If I try to isolate ageing as a mechanism for thinking about Akerman's films, it becomes a multi-faceted lens through which I can see many other issues at stake:

[2]Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 22. 'Old age is not a mere statistical fact; it is the prolongation and the last stage of a certain process. What does this process consist of? In other words, what does growing old mean? The notion is bound up with that of change. Yet the life of the foetus, of the new-born baby and of the child is one of continuous change. Must we therefore say, as some have said, that our life is a gradual death? Certainly not. A paradox of this kind disregards the basic truth of life -- life is an unstable system in which balance is continually lost and continually recovered: it is inertia that is synonymous with death.' Translation in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, Trans. Patrick O' Brien (New York: Putnam, 1972), p. 11.

self-production, affect, embodiment, gender, visibility, intergenerational relationships, maternity (or its absence), daughterhood, mortality.

At the very least, I want to suggest that, throughout Akerman's prolific filmmaking career, *ageing* is something refused, denied, exchanged in an oddly permanent and strangely replaceable relation between generations of on-screen women. *Agelessness*, a suspension of life and death, refuses the indexical links between ageing, vivacity and mortality. And that suspension is closely linked to a space of intimacy and displacement in Akerman's work. The films I mention in this chapter, *Saute ma ville* (1968), *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi* (1980), *Demain on déménage* (2004), *La Folie Almayer* (2011), and *No Home Movie* (2015), all refuse, suspend or otherwise do battle with age, mortality and the passage of time, using diverse but mutually resonant tactics. Resistance to domesticity, and transit through the depiction of exterior urban topographies go hand in hand with an intimate attention to interior space, and the space of relations between mothers and daughters. In each case, there is a resistance to ageing so powerful that the young women of each film become interchangeable avatars – interchangeable for each other, and interchangeable, in a more diffuse sense, for the autobiographically-infused subjectivity in Akerman's films. While the term 'avatar' is more commonly associated with virtual reality and gaming, its broader meaning pertains to bodily incarnations, deriving from the Hindu Sanskrit term for descent.[3] An older sense of the avatar relates to its iconic value as a manifestation of a particular person. It therefore seems particularly relevant to use such a term to describe the interchangeable replacements of one young female figure for another, across almost the entirety of Akerman's filmmaking. Descent, in the form of a

[3] "avatar, n.". 2017. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13624 (accessed 5 January 2018)

queer genealogy of female avatars, becomes a means of evading the 'decline' that Beauvoir identifies as the inimicable change of ageing. The older figures are not done away with – as becomes apparent in both *Aujourd'hui dis-moi* and *No Home Movie* — but they seamlessly shift position in relation to their younger selves. This quality of resistance to the passage of time, and its affective implications, is what I think through in this chapter.

Resisting age

I have in earlier writing referred to Akerman's work as offering a kind of 'resistant cinema': resistant to categories of nationhood, medium, generic conventions of documentary and feature-length fiction films.[4] Akerman made multi-channel installations and musicals, epistolary autobiographical films and testimonials. Her work slips in-between different ways of thinking about film, and about selfhood, memory, family, sexuality, gender, identity, displacement. This 'resistance' is also to do with contesting a singular subjective position: refusing a consistent 'I' voice in Akerman's work, and thereby challenging autobiography as a means of delineating selfhood and subjectivity, in as much as her work also embraces it. Ros Murray has thoughtfully extended this idea of resistance to a positive and radically queer feminist temporality. She writes of resistance as the exercise of power through gendered and sexual difference, depicted in Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1975): 'it is through bodily sexual acts rather than subjective identities that the film operates its queer resistance.'[5] In this film, the bodily sexual acts are between two young women – acts which,

[4] Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 151-56

[5] Ros Murray, 'The Radical Politics of Possibility: Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chantal Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1975)' *Feral Feminisms*, 5 (Spring 2016) 44-56 (p. 52).

as Murray and Ivone Margulies have noticed, elide difference between the position of 'elle' that the title seems to work so hard to delineate.[6] This is problematic insomuch as it creates an almost suffocating proximity between the possibility of an 'I' and the possibility of a 'you' in Akerman's work. This intoxicating proximity of self to other manifests itself elsewhere in Akerman's films, outside sexual relations, and in other relational forms. Alisa Lebow gives a compelling argument for Akerman's lifelong concern, obsession even, with her mother, Natalia Akerman, also known as Nelly, and the combination of stifling proximity and heretical distance that plays out, over and over, in her films. She suggests that Akerman effectively creates a slippage between the 'I' voice of herself, and the 'I' voice of other selves, the most significant one being her mother, a woman who retains the living memory of Akerman's past. Lebow describes this as 'a complete and thoroughgoing slippage of subject-object relations, wherein there can be no subject, no articulated "I" on its own, no boundary between the "I" and the "m/other"'.[7] Akerman both becomes and is no different from her own mother. But perhaps this sense is broader: the 'I' subject of Akerman's films and writing both becomes and is yet somehow not equivalent to other 'I's, other selves. Suffocatingly close and yet not quite identical.

The slippery resistance to categorizations and delineations in Akerman's work seems to work in two ways. There is a resistance to genre classification, to medium, certainly to narrative convention, resistance to direct autobiographical account, and resistance to heteronormative frameworks of sexuality. But that resistance to boundaries also produces slippage and elision, not knowing, or not showing, where one person begins and another

[6] Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens*: *Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 1. Cited in Murray, 'Radical Politics', p. 52.
[7] Alisa Lebow, 'Identity Slips: The Autobiographical Register in the Work of Chantal Akerman', *Film Quarterly* (2016) 70:1, 54-60 (p. 56).

ends. This becomes a resistance to the distinctions between you and I, self and other, individual and context. When Akerman's young 18-year-old avatar blows herself up, she also blows up her town. There is no meaningful distinction between the one individual and the many. Perhaps this is a way of understanding the figure of the young woman, as she appears and reappears across Akerman's fiction films. Akerman as a young woman on-screen in *Saute ma ville* and *Je tu il elle*, is replaced by Aurore Clément in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (Fig. 1). Aurore Clément is replaced by Sylvie Testud in *Demain on déménage* (Fig. 2). And the figure of the white, metropolitan French/Belgian young woman is displaced in altogether more complex ways in Akerman's adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel, *Almayer's Folly*, by the Belgian-Rwandan-Greek actor Aurora Marion (Fig. 3). This retinue of young female figures retains ghostly elements of individuality. They are all played by prodigiously talented performers, who each bring distinctive physical and emotional qualities to their roles. Nonetheless, the slippage between young, female performers and Akerman's resistance to individual subjective positions in her films seems more than coincidental.

Figure 1: Aurore Clément's face in Les Rendez-vous d'Anna *(1978)*

Figure 2: Sylvie Testud's face in Demain on déménage *(2004)*

Figure 3: Aurora Marion in La Folie Almayer *(2011)*

Daughters, transit, and time

While some women become mothers, many (but not all) women begin as or become daughters. And while I myself am not defined solely by my daughterhood, my position as a daughter forms part of the relational compact that makes up the notion of myself as a woman in the world. Daughterhood is a powerfully dominant (but by no means exclusive) characteristic of femininity, far more common than motherhood. But while motherhood often implies a certain reproductive age, daughterhood does not. The temporality of these two relations is different. The figure of the young woman is implicitly that of a daughter, particularly so in many of Akerman's films. Each young female figure in her films is childless, wandering, often connected but even more often displaced. Women – mothers and daughters – wander in many of Akerman's films of the 70s: even Jeanne Dielman, the famous mother of Akerman's eponymous film whose range of movement is so strangled by the limits of Brussels and her apartment, wanders from time to time: to the haberdashers where she seeks a match for a lost button. To the market to buy potatoes. To the cobblers to repair shoes. The letters from Jeanne's sister decry her singledom, her apparent inability to move forward with her life after the death of her husband. They bind her to her wifehood and her status as an adult daughter and sibling, which Jeanne resists, first by degrees, then by an avalanche. In one of Akerman's semi-autobiographical novellas, *Une famille à Bruxelles*, she writes about women who stay close and women who go far away, from a perspective that slips between that of a mother left behind in Brussels, and that of a daughter, affirmatively elsewhere:

> Chacun a sa vie. Surtout quand on est loin. Et même quand on est près mais quand on est près ça se sent au téléphone et on peut se dire à bientôt et

parfois on se voit. On dit aussi à bientôt à ceux qui sont loin au téléphone mais on sait qu'on ne se verra pas bientôt et parfois ceux qui sont loin on ne les appelle pas ou presque jamais même quand c'est de la famille proche.[8]

Nearness and farness, the impression of proximity and the facticity of distance, these are concerns of mothers and daughters. But the daughters are always far away. I recognize in Akerman's writing a duality: the transparency of writing in the close third person – so close that it is almost impossible to distinguish between third and first; between *she* and *me*. But there is also the sadness, reserve and frustration of a dispersed family. The impression of distance through proximity, and of intimacy through distance, is a consistent paradox in Akerman's filmmaking too. Like in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, where the young woman, Anna (Aurore Clément), operates at a distance from the temporal reminder of where she came from that is her mother. On tour to promote her new film, Anna waits on trains, endlessly shuttling between European cities. She is alone, but connected, by the telephone, to her mother, and also to her male lovers. Even her female partner, who she never quite reaches, is part of that network of wired media and train tracks. Her wandering, and her paradoxical disconnectedness within a nexus of European connections, place her in a strange sort of hang-time. For the time that she is travelling, she is ageless: her temporality is halted. This agelessness is written in her face, a kind of miserable inertia in the midst of movement (Fig. 4).

[8] Everyone's got their own life. Especially when you are far away. And even when you're close by but when you're close by you can feel it on the telephone and you can say see you soon and sometimes you see each other. You also say see you soon on the phone to those who are far away but you know that you won't see each other soon, and sometimes the ones who are far away you don't call them or hardly ever even when it's close family (translation mine). Chantal Akerman, *Une famille à Bruxelles* (Paris: L'Arche: 1998), p. 9.

Figure 4: Aurore Clément in Paris, Les Rendez-vous d'Anna

Figure 5: Church of the Madeleine in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*

Figure 6: Sex Shops in Pigalle, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*

What I see in Anna's young, unlined face is quiet, absorbed misery. I search for the signs of sadness in her face, for the prick of tears in her shining eyes, the slight adjustment of her jaw and opened mouth as if to exhale pain, just as I search for identifying landmarks in the city that are implicitly the objects of Anna's looking. The matching dashboard shot that follows the extended, silent portrait of Anna, reveals a dehumanized, barely illuminated Paris, populated by the rear lights and bumpers of endless streams of cars. Almost nothing of human shape or size is observable within the frame: vehicles and buildings, street lamps and street furniture dance before the screen and emanate light in a human darkness, reflected occasionally in an otherwise invisibly present windscreen. Both the camera, and the implied vision of Anna, demonstrate a desolate absorption in the movement through the city of Paris, where the church of the Madeleine (Fig. 5) and the sex shops of Pigalle (Fig. 6) intermingle with car headlamps and wet streets. She looks, she listens, she waits, as she travels. But as she looks outwards, beyond the frame, she is also looking inwards; her

apparent misery is as impenetrable as the barely distinguishable outlines of a city in movement.

Giuliana Bruno has described this commingling of interior and exterior space as a means of tracking 'an intimate journey'. For Bruno, technologies of travel and communication are deeply entwined with intimacy: 'A family or personal history can only be displayed in a virtual place of transit – the railway or the hotel at that time, the smart phone or the laptop now – a site inhabited each "night and day" by different stories'.[9] Bruno describes transit as a space of affective intensity, but this is somehow combined in Akerman's films, and even more so in her moving image installations, with a sense of slowed time, a kind of *intemporality*, that runs against the grain of any possibility of fluid, seamless connection. This quality of hang-time or dead time she identifies particularly in one of Akerman's' last multi-channel installations, *Femmes d'Anvers en novembre* (2008), which for her 'renews Akerman's filmic sense of inhabiting a city, dwelling especially on those instants of pause and transition, reflection and anxiety, when women are on their own, ambling, walking in the rain, lingering, caught in an intermediate zone. The work is suspended between a before and an after, in the unsettling time of a transitory moment.'[10]

Transit and transition seem to be intimately linked for the young female avatars of Akerman's films. But what if this intermediate zone — whether a zone of wandering, or a zone of domestic space – were the zone of processing, where things happen psychically, particularly related to the emotions and embodiment of subjectivity? What if the quotidian zone of laboured or professional activity were the place where that embodied life is halted?

[9] Giuliana Bruno, 'Projection: On Akerman's Screen' in *Chantal Akerman: Too Far, Too Close*, ed. by Anders Kreuger (Antwerp: Ludion/MHKA, 2012) 15-34 (p. 16-17)
[10] Bruno, 'Projection', p. 18.

Where stopping and doing nothing much at all is not so much a means of resisting ageing, as a different form of change? Intermediate zones – of wandering and of stillness – might offer a way of rethinking the relationships between ageing, human temporality, and resistant subjectivity, which persist in the female protagonists of Akerman's films.

Intergenerational Akerman

A rarely discussed mid-length film for television that Akerman made in 1980, aged 30, called *Aujourd'hui dis-moi*, brings together both wandering and domestic stillness, and the intergenerational relations between young and older women. At the time of writing, the film is digitized and available in its entirety via the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel website, and is a kind of fictionalized documentary tracing a series of interviews with female Holocaust survivors living in Paris about their family lives, while sitting in their homes eating cake and drinking tea or coffee. The interviews given by these women are impeccably articulated: they tell their stories with such grace that it seems difficult to imagine that the images and sounds are anything other than formally scripted and choreographed. And yet, the domestic settings, and the direct honesty, tenderness and emotion with which these women speak gives a powerful sense of augmented authenticity. Whereas for Walter Benjamin 'the presence of the original is the pre-requisite to the concept of authenticity'[11], both performance studies and documentary theory have had frequent recourse to other ways of understanding authenticity, particularly where any notion of the 'original' is ontologically unstable. In the case of the moving image, where performance and self-

[11] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968 [1936]) 217-251, p. 220

presentation overlap closely, the temporality of 'authentic' performances falls out of joint, as Rebecca Schneider highlights:

> The explicit replay of a time-based art troubles the prerogatives of singular artists, the assumptions of forward-marching time […] Touching time against itself, by bringing time *again and again* out of joint into theatrical, even anamorphic, relief presents the real, the actual, the raw and the true as, precisely, the zigzagging, diagonal, and crookedly imprecise returns of time.[12]

In *Aujourd'hui, dis moi*, the positioning and design of each interior shot is carefully designed so as to maximize screen space and attention on the older women as they tell their stories. The means by which these accounts are manufactured on screen gives rise to layers of artifice as well as layers of authenticity; layers which bring their personal storytelling as elderly witnesses into theatrical relief within an imprecise temporality, as Schneider so aptly describes.

Akerman, as listener-protagonist, says very little in these encounters, occasionally nodding with encouragement. The presence of the on-screen Akerman evidently gives pleasure to the women, but there is also the reassurance of storytelling and a form of oral history in these encounters – a speaker, and a listener. Even though their stories are of death, genocide, disappearance, there is also a quality of calm joy in the intergenerational exchange between a younger and an older woman. In between each visit to an older woman, the film segments shots of Akerman moving through Paris, via the Métro, while the

[12] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 16.

voiceover, spoken by Akerman's mother, Nelly, describes her own history of post-Holocaust survival. The account that Nelly gives at intervals where Akerman is depicted walking from apartment building to apartment building, is disarming: honest, authoritative, deep, quick and intelligent. It is distinctively, heartrendingly different from the quality of Nelly's voice, as captured in Akerman's' last film, *No Home Movie*.

The title of the film *Aujourd'hui dis moi* implicates both the present moment, and storytelling, as means of preserving intergenerational connection – intergenerational temporality, even. Storytelling as a means of connecting at a distance; the present as a means of accessing the process of storytelling. The tellers of those stories are human vessels, and with each unique and precious vessel, the story changes – and in that process of change, there is also a mode of quiet pleasure. I don't know quite what to do with this notion of the pleasure of intergenerational ageing and of witnessing that ageing process, other than to return, as if on an eternal loop, to Beauvoir's assertion that the ideologies of ageing bear infinitely close resemblance to the continual change that is life. This kind of pleasure is linked to resistance, to queering the temporality of female ageing – not as a period of decline and stasis, but rather as avatarial descent: a marker of the constant change which, as Beauvoir reminds us, is a condition of life. If there is pleasure in ageing through intergenerational contact, as much as there is a refusal on Akerman's part to experience or represent this decline through herself, then perhaps this is what is mirrored both in *Aujourd'hui dis-moi*, and in Akerman's last film, *No Home Movie*.

Viewing these two films in close proximity, there is a shock in the dramatic change to the quality and timbre of Nelly's voice – from the fullness of pleasure, to the thinness of pain. In *No Home Movie,* her voice broadcasts age in a viscerally distinctive way: its pace and volume gradually diminish to a trickle, and then a grunt, and then a gurgling, visceral cough.

In comparison to Nelly's voiceover from *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi* it constitutes a more poignant indicator of ageing through sound than comparative portraiture might do through vision. It is possible to trace ageing in Akerman's films, but it is the ageing of others, the gradual transition of those who constitute the memories and testimonies of domestic life, from living material into celluloid stock or digital images, that becomes visible (or indeed audible) and contextualized on screen.

No Home Movie is littered with long sequences in Nelly Akerman's apartment where she moves back and forth in front of the camera, aimlessly wandering. Each sequence reveals so much about Akerman's elderly mother's bodily comportment and health. In the second sequence of the film, the camera is stood at table height, thus revealing most of Nelly's body as she passes to and fro in front of it. Her left arm is held tensely against her body, protectively, while her right arm swings loosely akimbo. The imbalance of these two sides of her body immediately draw attention to immobility, and also to pain: I could see in Nelly's body, before any speech or voiceover informed me of this, that her slightly shuffling, imbalanced gait and trapped arm indicated injury (Fig. 7)

Figure 7: Nelly Akerman in her apartment in *No Home Movie* (2015)

The intermediate zone of waiting, preparing, doing nothing much, is exactly where Nelly's bodily subjectivity becomes visible, just as it does for Akerman's fictional avatar-protagonists. The pleasure and pain of embodying memory in Nelly's ageing body seem to come to the fore, just as her position as mother, as keeper of memories, seems to hold Akerman in the same pattern of nearly-invisible daughterhood, the same ageless moment. Now ageless in the mortal sense, since this is the last record of both Nelly and Chantal, speaking, breathing, and living together. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that we barely see Chantal Akerman at all in *No Home Movie*. She is sometimes captured crossing the field of vision of the camera she has placed in Nelly Akerman's Brussels apartment. But in other locations, in hotel rooms and apartments as Akerman travels, she is behind the camera, filming the sickly-sweet Skype conversations she has with her mother. Then again, human bodies are almost completely obliterated in segments of the film, where, for instance, the skype camera pixelates and defocuses her mother's face. Or where the exposure of the

video camera is deliberately stopped so low that her mother's ailing body is barely visible. Or where Akerman records the barren landscape of the desert in Israel, or the emptiness of her mother's apartment in the last, mute sequences of the film.

I appreciate that there is a slippage in my own thoughts here, between the female figures on-screen in Akerman's films. I have slipped, from talking about the apparently ageless, apparently replaceable but nonetheless consistent figure of the young woman in Akerman's films, to talking about an intimate portrait of Akerman's mother, Natalia – Nelly. I'm aware that by doing this I may be missing the point of talking about ageing – that it is essential to point out the social, cultural, physical, aesthetic and formal difference between the depictions of young women and depictions of ageing women. But I keep returning to the initial words of Simone de Beauvoir – that ageing is not a determinate point, but rather an extension of a process of constant change. Constant change is nonetheless potentially alarming, and brings with it social signals of the diminishment of power. At the same time, I want to suggest that this slippage in Akerman's own films – between female protagonists especially – is a means of *resisting* the designations of ageing as decline. To call this perverse is probably *not* missing the point at all: Akerman's work has long been lauded as an example of queer and resistant filmmaking. If she queers the temporalities of daughterhood, and indeed the temporalities of motherhood, then she is also queering the temporalities of ageing, particularly and specifically female ageing.

It is obvious to say that ageing and temporality are intimately linked. But if this is true, then other kinds of temporality are also called into play. Hang-time in domestic space and hang-time through transit seem, rather paradoxically, to bring together the emotional intensities of adult mother-daughter relationships. Perhaps the central question I am asking here, is how the interchangeability of young (and old) female protagonists in Akerman's

films connects to, or descends from, the transitional emotional topographies that they experience in the films' narrative structures? These are recurring patterns across Akerman's fiction and non-fiction films, which emerge in the young female avatars' contact between exterior spaces of transit, and interior spaces of domestic, emotional and intergenerational contemplation. When considering the films in relation to one another, across a span of nearly fifty years, the persistence of these forms creates a pattern of meaning across an oeuvre. What is the temporality of this pattern? How do the spaces which frame and are inhabited by Akerman's avatars indicate the temporal relations of subjectivity, such as ageing, and daughterhood? Perhaps *indicate* is the wrong word, given the emphasis I have placed on the slippery resistance of Akerman's work. The films do not *indicate* the place of daughterhood, or of ageing, or indeed of subjectivity, so much as refuse to indicate or locate intergenerational relations – or any kind of subjective relation – in a distinct or exclusive form: not as gradual decline, but as tumbling, transformative descent. Rather than considering the slippage between the 'I' form and the 'you' form of address, or the interchangeable avatars of the films, as a kind of cinematic psychopathology, I wonder whether it might be possible instead to consider these slippages and resistances as something other: a different form of queer kinship, where the distance between the feminine 'I' and the feminine 'you' is forever changing, overlapping, defiant, and indeed, ageless.