

Approaching the Other as Other: A Study of the Ethical Nature of Chantal Akerman's

Films

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ABSTRACT

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Filmmaker Chantal Akerman utilizes specific representational devices in her films in order to address the film spectator in an ethical manner. The ethical nature of Akerman's films results from the form of character presentation Akerman employs. *Approaching the Other as Other* performs a detailed examination of the presentation of character in Akerman's films, analyzing Akerman's use of conventions of classical cinema as well as her use of devices associated with experimental and avant-garde cinema. Through the systematic avoidance of psychological or emotional insights into her films' characters, while still maintaining a 'realistic' presentation of character, Akerman presents the characters in her films as 'unknowable' and opaque individuals to the spectator.

This treatment of character points to Judith Butler's discussion of ethics in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). According to Butler, the ethical lies in discarding the belief that the other can and should explain themselves; this is because, in Butler's view, both the self and the other are fundamentally unknowable. This thesis uses Butler's conception of ethics to show that Akerman's presentation of character is ethical, as Akerman's films ask the spectator to contemplate the impossibility of knowing the other. Such contemplation, Butler argues, constitutes an ethical resource. Examining various films of Akerman's, *Approaching the Other as Other* outlines the operation of these films' ethical address, illustrating the divergences and continuities in the address across Akerman's different styles of filmmaking, and ultimately contends that Akerman's films address the spectator as a being capable of ethical reflection.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Film, Ethics, and Chantal Akerman	
<i>Giving an Account of Oneself: Butler's Ethics</i> ...	2
Ethics and Film Studies ...	11
Character Identification ...	20
Akerman, Film, and Ethics ...	28
Akerman's Films: Aspects of the Ethical ...	35
Chapter 1	39
Akerman's Ethics of Spectatorship: Recognizing the Other in <i>Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles</i> and <i>Les rendez-vous d'Anna</i>	
The Ethics of Accountability ...	39
Character and Identification in Classical Realist Film ...	43
Akerman and the Avant-Garde(s) ...	48
Jeanne and Anna: Presenting the Unknowable...	54
Ethical Identification ...	67
Jeanne Dielman: The Unknowable Character ...	69
Anna: Unfathomable Emotions ...	72
Identifying with Anna and Jeanne ...	76
Chapter 2	79
<i>Demain on déménage</i> , <i>Un divan à New York</i> , and <i>La captive</i> : Akerman's Ethical Hollywood	
The Ethical in Akerman's Classical Cinema ...	81
<i>Demain on déménage</i> ...	85
Contradictory and Confused Characters ...	87
Contemplating Interiority ...	94
<i>Un divan à New York</i> ...	99
Love, Exposed ...	103
Unknowing Love: An Ethical Relation ...	109
<i>La captive</i> ...	112
Ariane: An Apparent Automaton ...	115
Simon: Incomplete Alignment ...	117
<i>Vertigo</i> : A Change of Alignment ...	121
Without Condemnation: An Ethical Address ...	126

Conclusion

131

Akerman and Ethical Cinema

Là-bas: Akerman as Character ... 133

Concluding Remarks ... 143

Bibliography

146

Introduction: Film, Ethics, and Chantal Akerman

The way in which Chantal Akerman's films address their spectator points to questions about the limits of self-knowledge and related concerns about relations between human beings. Akerman's concerns are ethical in nature and, as such, they present an avenue to investigate the following question: "is it possible to establish a parallel between our ethical response to people in life and our response to film characters?" The characters in Akerman's films are not psychologically motivated and do not encourage identification like those found in classical narrative cinema. Yet they are not Brechtian characters either, insofar as they are still representations of human beings existing in a 'realistic' diegesis. These characters have interior worlds, to which, however, the film spectator is not given access; spectators receive no information about the characters' internal worlds through narrative or psychological hints, dialogue, voice-over or any other avenue. Akerman's refusal to reveal her characters' thoughts and feelings to the spectator expresses the belief that there is limit to what can be revealed about a character in a film, a refusal which refers to the 'limits of knowability of oneself and others' as discussed in Judith Butler's book *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). This thesis examines character presentation in Akerman's films from the point of view of ethics, with particular reference to the work of Judith Butler. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler argues for the existence of limits to self-knowledge and stresses the ethical importance of recognizing and accepting that limit in oneself and others. Butler's ideas

about the limited nature of self-knowledge and knowledge of others will provide an interpretive key with which this thesis analyzes Akerman's films.

An application of Butler's conception of ethics to Akerman's films will provide a productive analysis of these films' address of their spectator. Akerman's foregrounding of the opacity of her films' characters – of the fact that they *cannot* explain their actions to us, just as they cannot fully explain those actions to themselves – places the spectator in a position in which ethical responsibility rests with the spectator: do we dismiss these characters, or can we value them as human beings and confer recognition on them in spite of their opacity? Butler writes,

[W]e must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient “I” as a kind of possession.¹

Akerman's films work to bring the spectator to these ‘moments of unknowingness.’ Her films require the spectator to contemplate individual characters at length and ultimately recognize them, becoming undone themselves somewhat in accepting the character's unknowability, or to turn away from the character, condemning the character for his or her opacity. An examination of the ways Akerman lays out these possibilities, and the ways those possibilities function in different films, will constitute the focus of this thesis.

¹ Ibid., 136.

Giving an Account of Oneself: Butler's Ethics

In her discussion of ethics, Butler addresses the post-structural understanding of the subject as constituted in and through the operation of social norms, and the disparities which arise when this understanding of the subject is aligned with the belief that any overarching system of ethics must rely on the notion of individual agency and the resulting ability to be held responsible for one's acts. Her aim is to designate an understanding of ethics which emphasizes the importance of relations between human beings (as opposed to individualistic or narcissistic notions of morality which take self-preservation as their highest goal²) while maintaining a conception of responsibility in conjunction with the basic assumption of a de-centered self:

[T]he "I" has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms. Although many contemporary critics worry that this means there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the ground for moral agency and moral accountability, that conclusion does not follow.³

Over the course of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler outlines a concept of the subject which can serve as the ground for moral agency and accountability. This is a subject whose self-knowledge is fundamentally limited. Butler illustrates this limited self-knowledge in her description of the subject's inability to give a full 'account of oneself.' Further, by coming to understand the limited nature of self-knowledge, this subject is predisposed to shed the demand for exhaustive self-explanation from others; rather, in understanding the relationship between human beings, between the 'you' and the 'I', to

² Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press: 2005, 100.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

be an inescapable, constitutive facet of oneself, there is an imperative to *recognize* the other. This recognition lies in confronting and accepting both the singularity and essential value of the other, as one would like to be recognized themselves.

When Butler claims that there is no story of the “I” which is not also a story of a relation to social norms, she is referencing the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault.⁴ Foucault, in his extensive writing on various Western institutions, has argued that power is productive, dispersed and not associated with a specific source. For Foucault, power works “through institutionalized and accustomed discourses that open up delimited forms of action, knowledge and being. In this way the exercise of power constitutes as it simultaneously controls individual subjects.”⁵ In her discussion, Butler retains Foucault’s notion that normative discourses affect subjects while also manifesting through the actions of those subjects. She applies this notion to the question of ethics, noting that one is “caught up not only in the sphere of normativity but in the problematic of power when I pose the ethical question [...]: ‘How ought I to treat you?’”⁶ Specifically emphasizing the influence of norms upon the relation between individuals, Butler continues on to say “If the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ must first come into being, and if a normative frame is necessary for this emergence and encounter, then norms work not only to direct my conduct but to condition the possible emergence of an encounter between myself and the other.”⁷ As Butler will address further, this constitutive influence of norms upon (and through) individuals is beyond the conscious

⁴ Judith Butler’s previous work, particularly her two predominant works on gender performativity (*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge, 1993 and *Gender Trouble* (1999) New York: Routledge, 2007), has also drawn on Foucault’s writings.

⁵ Brooker, Peter. *A Glossary of Cultural Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 206.

⁶ *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

comprehension of human beings; the operation of social norms contributes to limited self-knowledge.

The social norms Butler discusses here are impersonal. As in the example of language, these norms are not authored by the individual utilizing them. Butler, however, differentiates between the individual and the set of social norms through which one encounters an individual (and is encountered themselves). She notes that Foucault's concept of a 'regime of truth' – an historically specific set of criteria determining what will be acceptable or visible within the current dominant discourses – may sometimes change, or be changed, to accommodate an other who is not recognizable under the current regime⁸; it “will not do, then, to collapse the notion of the other into the sociality of norms and claim that the other is implicitly present in the norms by which recognition is conferred.”⁹ Because a challenge to dominant norms may issue from the other, the other and social norms are not one and the same. In order to illuminate this limit to the generic effect of norms upon the individual, Butler looks to the work of Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero.

In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), Cavarero addresses the connection between narration and the construction of the self, arguing for a focus on the “you,” as there can be no “I” without a “you” to address.¹⁰ In Cavarero's conception of identity, a human being's singularity and uniqueness lies in the unique story (or collection of stories) that an other can tell about them; Oedipus, for example, “does not embark on any introspective journey into the *interior* of his self, but rather comes to

⁸ Ibid., 22-26.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Though this notion underlies the entirety of the book, see *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Trans. Kottman, Paul A. New York: Routledge, 2000, pages 81-92, particularly.

know his identity from the *outside*, through the story that others tell him.”¹¹ For Cavarero, human beings exist in their *appearing* to others, in their material *exposure* in the social realm.¹² Butler focuses on this notion of exposure particularly, arguing that, because each individual exists in their singular exposure, we are ‘unsubstitutable.’¹³ As “no one can be exposed for me,”¹⁴ the generic effect of the social upon the individual is limited – we are not the same as the other despite our shared operation under and through impersonal social norms. Cavarero’s discussion of exposure is also important to Butler in another sense: “If there is, then, a part of bodily experience as well – of what is indexed by the word *exposure* – that cannot be narrated but constitutes the bodily condition of one’s narrative account of oneself, then exposure constitutes one among several vexations in the effort to give a narrative account of oneself.”¹⁵ In other words, this exposure is an element of the unknowability of the self.

Butler finds another ‘vexation’ in the attempt to give an account of oneself in the developmental history of the individual. Through an examination of the writings of French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche,¹⁶ Butler argues that primary impressions form the self’s psyche – primary impressions which pre-date the self’s consciousness and which are thus unavailable to conscious memory or understanding. In Laplanche’s work, these primary impressions are caused by the “overwhelming and enigmatic impressions made

¹¹ Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives*, 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹³ Butler is careful to emphasize that, for Cavarero, human beings’ singularity is not linked to a ‘claim of authenticity.’ This singular exposure is separate from an individual’s life-story (See Cavarero, 34-35). Butler explains, “because [singular exposure] is without content, my singularity has some properties in common with yours and so is, to some extent, a substitutable term.” *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 34.

¹⁴ *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁶ Butler is particularly referencing Laplanche from the collection *Essays on Otherness*, ed. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999) and his essay “The Drive and the Object-Source: Its Fate in the Transference,” in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, eds. Fletcher and Stanton.

by the adult world in its specificity on the child.”¹⁷ The result of this impingement of the adult other on the infant is, Butler writes, that “we find ourselves besieged from the start by an enigmatic alterity that makes the elaboration of an ‘I’ a persistently difficult achievement.” Thus, the possibility of self-knowledge is circumscribed by unknowable effect of the other upon the self: “I may try to tell the story of myself, but another story is already at work in me, and there is no way to distinguish between the ‘I’ who has emerged from this infantile condition and the ‘you’ – the set of ‘you’s’ – who inhabits and dispossesses my desire from the outset.”¹⁸ The self cannot know itself entirely, and thus cannot express itself to others entirely, because one’s ‘self’ was never fully one’s own.

In summary, Butler claims that no one can know themselves totally because, as she writes,

There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) *primary relations*, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my *partial opacity* to myself emerges. Lastly, there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the *structure of address* in which it takes place.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

Because self-knowledge is thus circumscribed, so is the ability to describe oneself to others or to give a full account of and for one's actions. It follows, then, that an expectation that another person should be able to explain themselves completely is untenable; demanding an explanation from another regarding their actions would result in a partial fiction, at best. Whereas traditional views of ethics rely on a conception of the individual as an autonomous agent who can be judged according to the motivations or excuses for their behaviour, and who can ultimately be held responsible for their actions, Butler's assertions of the unknowability of the self trouble this conception of the individual. If we cannot hold someone accountable by demanding an explanation of the 'why' behind their actions, does that alleviate responsibility? As stated previously, Butler does not believe this is the case. She turns to the work of continental philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in order to explain how the concept of responsibility must operate in the ethical system she is outlining.²⁰

In Levinas' view, individuals are formed through an originary impingement by the other upon themselves. This impingement is a persecution of the self by the other because it is unilateral and "because it is unwilled, because we are radically subject to another's action upon us, and because there is no possibility of replacing this susceptibility with an act of will or an exercise in freedom."²¹ While the understanding of a subject as affected by the other has some relation to Laplanche's conception of the adult world's influence upon the infant, for Levinas subject formation occurs at a primary level

²⁰ Butler is particularly referencing the 1968 version of Levinas' "Substitution," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, *Otherwise than Being, or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, and *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990, originally published as *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1976.

²¹ Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 88.

in which “we are acted upon by others in ways over which we have no say, and that this passivity, susceptibility and condition of *being impinged upon* inaugurate who we are;” this impingement is not diachronically limited to childhood but is a condition which “is, rather, understood as synchronic and infinitely recurring.”²² For Levinas, it is this defining predisposition of humans as ‘subjects being acted upon’ which makes us responsible.

Our position as beings always subject to the actions of others makes us responsible for those actions, according to Levinas. This position of openness to the other is a fundamental aspect of humanity, and it is the inescapable quality of this relation to the other which places us in a responsible relation to the other. Levinas reverses the idea that human can only be held responsible for acts committed of our own free will, and instead ties responsibility to human’s lack of freedom, our inability to choose to be free of the other. This understanding of responsibility for the other does not mean that we must blame ourselves for others’ behaviour towards us, or attempt to find cause in our own action for others’ actions. As Butler explains,

*We do not take responsibility for the Other’s acts as if we authored those acts. On the contrary, we affirm the unfreedom at the heart of our relations. I cannot disavow my relation to the Other, regardless of what the Other does, regardless of what I might will. Indeed, responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other.*²³

²² Ibid., 90.

²³ Ibid., 91 (italics in original).

For Butler, this ‘resource of unwilled susceptibility’ is of great ethical importance. We may not be able to demand an account from the other in order to make them responsible, but, in Levinas’ view, they are always already responsible, just as we are. Of course, we can only affirm this responsibility ourselves, without speaking for others, and so our responsibility lies in how we react to other’s actions towards us: “[r]esponsibility thus arises as a demand upon the persecuted.”²⁴ For Butler, this understanding of human relationship maintains responsibility while relinquishing the demand for individuals to create a narrative²⁵, unifying, and falsified account of themselves – relinquishing the expectation that humans perform this ‘ethical violence’ upon themselves.²⁶

This ethics that Butler is putting forward asks us to consider the possibility of refusing to reciprocate violence or other wounding actions; that, in the limit case of whether we should kill in response to murder, we must ultimately consider that perhaps self-preservation should not be “the highest goal.”²⁷ In a general sense, the ethical approach Butler lays out encourages one to bring to their encounters with the other this sense of the fundamental importance of the other to oneself. For Butler, reacting to the other’s inability to justify themselves by condemning the other or disavowing their humanity is only a futile attempt to deny our inescapable relation to that other.²⁸ Instead, we must work to *recognize* the other in their value as a specific, unique individual – an individual as radically open to and dependent upon us as we are upon them.

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁵ While Butler argues that a narrative account of the self must be at least a partial fiction, she acknowledges that understanding one’s self narratively is not an entirely negative thing – it satisfies a wish for self-knowledge (51) – as long as it does not take the aim of ‘hyper-mastery’ of the self (52).

²⁶ These ideas are of course related to Butler’s earlier works on gender performativity (*Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*) and the belief, discussed in those works, that normative views of gender enforce similarly false accounts of the self.

²⁷ Ibid., 100.

²⁸ Ibid., 44-46.

This thesis will examine the connections between Butler's claims regarding ethics and the films of Chantal Akerman. The following section outlines some of the different ways critics have applied ethical rubrics to the study of film. This section also situates Butler's discussion of ethics in relation to other ethical approaches.

Ethics and Film Studies

In the application of ethical questions to film, one approach has been to examine the behaviour of characters in narrative realist films under a moral rubric. This examination, in turn, enables further investigation of the influence, positive or negative, of these characters' ethical actions upon the spectator. This is the general approach Jane Stadler takes in her work *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (2008). Stadler examines a number of films in order to show that film enables spectators to engage in 'thought experiments' concerning ethical behaviour, enabling spectators to analyze moral dilemmas and their own viewpoints toward such quandaries. Stadler takes the view that film is a particularly useful tool in examining ethical relations because it allows spectators to consider particular instances of human interaction in relation to 'universal' ethical codes; "narration and moral deliberation both involve drawing together the particular and the general, situating specific circumstances within the broader context of a life and a culture and considering abstract, general principles [...] against the concrete particulars of human lives."²⁹ Stadler's work underlines the

²⁹ Stadler, Jane. *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*. New York, NY: Continuum, 2008, 26. Much of Stadler's book works to distinguish film from other narrative mediums; taking a phenomenological approach, she claims that film is a particular ethical resource because of its affective influence on the spectator.

idea that spectators may consider film characters ethically, as they might consider other human beings – that a film spectator, despite recognizing a difference between film characters and real people, will bring to bear upon a film a similar level of analysis and moral interest that they utilize in their day to day lives.

Stadler's consideration of ethics in *Pulling Focus* departs from Butler's work. Stadler's approach to ethical consideration of film characters relies on an understanding of relations between individuals that Butler explicitly denies. Stadler sums up the relation between ethics and narrative as follows:

Understanding [...] takes root at the points where the viewer is most closely connected to the story, where empathic and imaginative activity assist in generating ideas and insights. Since ethical understanding (which involves understandings of human behavior, aspirations, values, and relationships) inescapably involves narrative and narration on some level, and often overly takes the form of a story in which we develop an account of motives and mitigating circumstances, actions, events, and their consequences, I've sought it in the strictures of narratives.³⁰

While Butler would likely agree with Stadler that a description of the self or other takes a narrative form, she would disagree that this necessarily partially fictive narrative would lead to a productive 'ethical understanding.' As Stadler explicitly points out, the kind of ethical understanding she is expounding relies on an account of the other's reasons. Butler would not only caution that demanding or creating an account for the other inevitably produces a fictional account but further, that, as some individuals have diminished access or are less recognizable under the dominant social norms which

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

support such an account, it is fundamentally unethical to use such an account to determine the value of an individual, or whether they are worthy of ‘ethical understanding.’ As Akerman’s films resolutely trouble any attempt to ‘develop an account’ of the motives of her characters, it is clear that these films are operating in a different ethical realm than that which Stadler describes.

Another ethical approach to the study of film is located in the work of American philosopher Stanley Cavell. As part of his larger body of philosophical writing, Cavell has published various books and essays on film. In works like *The World Viewed* (1971) and *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage* (1981), Cavell analyzes film, working from the belief that films ‘do philosophy.’³¹ Cavell feels that films perform philosophy in various ways, but there is one aspect of Cavell’s work which is particularly relevant to a consideration of ethics: his belief that films’ narratives, particularly the behaviour of characters, present material to spectators with which to think about the major philosophical questions of human life. Addressing this aspect of Cavell’s beliefs about films and other narrative mediums, Stanley Bates writes that, for Cavell, “these structures [of narrative texts] do not provide us with rules, or even examples to emulate, but rather with exemplars of wit, courage, cowardice, grace, skepticism, hope, success, and failure. They don’t answer our questions about how to live our lives, but they do give us means by which we can think about these issues.”³² Cavell approaches characters in film as though they were human beings, and thus examines characters’ behaviour as evidence of human ethical quandaries and aims.

³¹ For one example among many of Cavell’s notion that films perform philosophy, see Cavell’s *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1981, 10-11.

³² Bates, Stanley. “Stanley Cavell and Ethics.” *Stanley Cavell*. Ed. Richard Eldridge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 15-47. p. 43.

In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell delineates a set of Classical Hollywood films – films he terms the ‘comedies of remarriage’ – which present material with which to analyze a philosophical concern of great importance to Cavell’s work. Cavell explains, [The comedies of remarriage] may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel puts it) or demand for acknowledgement (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the views each holds of the other. This gives the films of our genre a utopian cast. [...] Showing us our fantasies, they express the inner agenda of a nation that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself.³³ (17-18)

In the comedies of remarriage, characters that were once married but are now divorced or separated come together again a second time. The second time around, they are able to acknowledge things about the other that they had not been able to previously, and, because of this, they can remarry and find happiness with the other.³⁴ For Cavell, these films enact the common human desire for acknowledgement and the ethical necessity of bestowing such acknowledgement.

Cavell’s form of acknowledgement entails understanding and accepting the other’s separateness from the self, and seeing that, because the other is not the self, it is not knowable as we know ourselves. Such acknowledgement of the other enables the

³³ *Pursuits of Happiness*, 17-18.

³⁴ In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell discusses many different films that contain variations of this pattern.

achievement of ‘personhood’ for the self and the creation of the social, as the individual sees that they must act in the world to connect with others.³⁵ In Cavell’s words,

[T]he existence of others is something of which we are unconscious, a piece of knowledge we repress, about which we draw a blank. This does violence to others, it separates their bodies from their souls, makes monsters of them; and presumably we do it because we feel that others are doing this violence to us. The release from this circle of vengeance is something I call acknowledgement. [...] You have to act to make things happen, night and day; and to act from within the world, within your connection with others, forgoing the wish for a place from which to view and direct your fate.³⁶

In his foregrounding of acknowledgement, Cavell is referencing the philosophical problem of the ‘existence of other minds.’ This problem of other minds arises from the commonly held belief that the minds and inner lives of other individuals are similar to our own; however, no philosophical argument can be made to justify this belief.³⁷ As such, we can never be sure that the mind and sensations of the other are similar to our own. Cavell discusses this problem as part of humans’ desire to withdraw from the social world into privateness and narcissism, as the social world is unknowable in its separateness from ourselves. Cavell believes that “acknowledgement of otherness [... is] the final condition for individual and for social happiness, namely the achieving of one’s

³⁵ See Rothman, William and Marian Keane. *Reading Cavell’s The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000, 260.

³⁶ *Pursuits of Happiness*, 109.

³⁷ Alec Hyslop, “Other Minds,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/other-minds/> Accessed on Feb 23, 2010.

adult self and the creation of the social”³⁸ and finds the enactment of such acknowledgement in the interactions between characters in the films he discusses.

The form of acknowledgement Cavell sees between the characters in the comedies of remarriage is a “reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis of death and revival, the achievement of a new perspective on existence.”³⁹ Cavell’s notion of acknowledgement has commonalities with Butler’s concept of ‘recognition,’ in which one realizes the innate value of the other, the dependence of the self on the other for reciprocal recognition, and the responsibility of the self to the other. There are, however, some important differences between Cavell and Butler’s respective understandings of individuals and ethics. Butler argues that there are limits to what one can know about the other because there are limits to what the other can know about themselves. Cavell does not present the self as fundamentally unknowable; likewise, he does not treat the other as unknowable in the sense that one cannot accept another’s explanation of their desires, motivations, or thoughts. The problem of the existence of other minds is primarily concerned with how we know that the nature of the other mind is similar to the nature of our own mind, not whether we can know information about how the other feels as expressed through the other’s actions.⁴⁰ Cavell separates knowledge from acknowledgement. In Cavell’s paradigm, we can have knowledge of the other and still not be able to acknowledge them.⁴¹

³⁸ Cavell, Stanley. *Pursuits of Happiness*, 102.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ “There is general agreement among philosophers that the problem of other minds is concerned with the fundamental issue of what entitles us to our basic belief that other human beings do have inner lives rather than whether we are able in specific cases to be sure what is happening in those inner lives.” Alec Hyslop, in “Other Minds,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/other-minds/> Accessed on Feb 23, 2010. In “Section 1: What is the Problem of Other Minds?”

⁴¹ See Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1979. 329-338. Particularly, Cavell writes, “If I say

Butler's conception of the relations between individuals does not encompass the problem of other minds; Butler works from the premise that the self is unknowable and, because the shape of the other's mind is fundamentally similar, the other is unknowable as well, to both its self and others. To clarify, just as Cavell claims that we can gain knowledge of others through their actions and words, Butler does not disparage the aim to address others' self-accounts or to attempt to understand what others want to tell us about themselves (such an attempt would likely partially fulfill the other's desire for recognition). She does caution, however, that the moment the desire to comprehend another's self-account becomes a *demand* for that account an act of ethical violence has been performed on that other. Cavell's work addresses the other's desire for acknowledgement, but not the ethical necessity of relinquishing the demand for account of the other as a pre-condition for acknowledgement. Both the unknowability of the self and the unethical nature of the demand for an account of the other are integral to Akerman's films, as will be explored throughout this thesis. As such, despite the apparent similarities between Cavell and Butler's respective understanding of human relations, Cavell's approach is, by and large, not applicable to Akerman's films (Cavell's considerations are somewhat more pertinent to Akerman's classical narrative films, particularly *Un divan à new York*, and will be addressed in Chapter 2). For this project, the importance of Cavell's work on film is found in his understanding that film characters constitute an ethical resource for spectators – film characters can provide means with which to think about our day-to-day relations to other people.

[...] that the slack of acknowledgement can never be taken up by knowledge, I do not mean to say that the imagination can never be fired by information, rather that you cannot always know when the fire will strike." (338)

As will be argued throughout this thesis, Akerman's films not only supply means for spectators to contemplate their feelings about the world – the films actually prompt spectators to consider specific beliefs about their relationship to that world and the other people in it. Akerman's films point out to the spectator the belief that both self-knowledge and knowledge of others is limited and, therefore, the presumption that we will ever fully know another is false. Further, Akerman's films illustrate the ways in which relating to other people, either by sympathizing with them or caring for them, while discarding the expectation that we can know them, can have beneficial results for interpersonal relationships. The beliefs Akerman's films express show similar sentiments to those found in Butler's ethical model. As such, Butler's approach provides the most pertinent ethical framework to bring into conjunction with Akerman's films, and through which to draw out the ethical nature of those films.

One further point of explanation is required concerning both Butler's notion of ethics and the way I will be discussing Akerman's films. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler does not specifically address questions of identity in relation to either gender or sexual orientation; this does not mean, however, that she has departed from the concerns of her earlier work. As Butler points out, the act of giving an account of oneself is inextricably tied up in the various social norms which regulate human discourse and which thus dictate the intelligibility of the subject and her account. This area of Butler's argument clearly references her earlier investigations, in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* particularly⁴², into both the performative nature of gender and identity and the means by which social norms preclude the recognizability of subjects who threaten the

⁴² See Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (1990) New York, NY: Routledge, 1999, and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York, NY: Routledge, 1993.

accepted binary division of gender or presumed naturalness of heterosexuality. Butler's concern with the representability of subjectivities which could be deemed marginal or 'unnatural' can already be seen to fall in line with Akerman's concerns as a filmmaker.

Akerman's films, as Gwendolyn Audrey Foster points out, are marked by "considerations of alterity, sexuality, subjectivity, performativity, mother-daughter relationships, Belgianicity, Jewish diasporic identity, female subjectivity, lesbian identity and other concomitant issues."⁴³ The films of Akerman's that will be discussed here include every one of these multifarious aspects of identity. Yet the focus here is to bring Butler's conception of ethics into conjunction with Akerman's films in order to describe what I see as a paradigm that Akerman sets up in her presentation of character; a paradigm which works to encourage the spectator to confront and possibly accept the 'limits of knowability' of the human figure. The aim is to outline what this paradigm consists of and how it might work. As such, if the focus of this work departs somewhat from a consideration of the fact that many of Akerman's main characters are women, it is with the hope not to flatten out or ignore Akerman's concern with gender.

Indeed, this thesis views the form of character presentation found in Akerman's cinema as the result of a remarkable dedication to exploring, in film, the representation of identity in all its forms. While many of Akerman's films, particularly her 1970s' films, are indisputably concerned with female subjectivity, the premise of this thesis is that Akerman's form of character presentation is not tied to a specific notion of female identity or subjectivity, but instead can be marshaled in the service of a multiplicity of

⁴³ "Introduction," *Identity and Memory*, 8

identities, or else the multifariousness of one subjectivity.⁴⁴ The following section will explore the concept of identification in film, providing necessary background for further discussion of the form of character presentation Akerman employs in her films.

Character Identification

Film spectators may experience their interaction with film characters as a form of ‘identification.’ The vernacular understanding of the term ‘identification’ connotes, in the cinematic context, a spectator’s active conscious consideration of a character and our emotional responses to that character. Murray Smith, in *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (1995), explains that the ‘everyday notion of identification’ describes a particular experience:

We watch a film, and find ourselves becoming attached to a particular character or characters on the basis of values or qualities roughly congruent with those we possess, or those we wish to possess, and experience vicariously the emotional experiences of the character: we identify with the character.⁴⁵

As Smith himself points out, this informal understanding of identification simplifies a number of different complicated processes which occur while watching a film.⁴⁶ In order to clarify these processes, Smith lays out a model in *Engaging Characters* which proposes three ‘levels’ of engagement which may occur between spectators and characters. These three levels of engagement between a spectator and character comprise

⁴⁴ This set-up of character is certainly not limited to Akerman, although she presents an exemplary form of this structure. Exploration of these aspects in the work of filmmakers like Todd Haynes and Apitchatpong Weerasethakul, for example, would no doubt present interesting results.

⁴⁵ *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

a ‘structure of sympathy’ which, Smith argues, accounts for the various responses often grouped under the notion of identification.⁴⁷ The following exploration of the ‘structure of sympathy’ will reveal why Smith’s understanding is relevant to analyzing Chantal Akerman’s films.

In Smith’s model, the first level of character engagement is *recognition*. Here, spectators deem a character to fit with their schema of what constitutes a human agent. In Smith’s words, the spectator recognizes the character as “a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space.”⁴⁸ When the spectator recognizes a character as a ‘discrete human body’ and as having other markers of human perceptual activity and awareness, the character becomes a candidate for sympathetic engagement.⁴⁹ The second level of the structure of sympathy is *alignment*. A spectator is aligned with a character if the film is ‘attached’ to that character spatially and temporally. As the spectator follows that character through the film’s diegetic time and space, he or she receives information about the character’s state of mind, history, goals, etc. Smith describes alignment as such, “[t]he term *alignment* describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel.”⁵⁰ In Smith’s model, alignment does not necessarily entail ‘identification’ with a character, but it is necessary for the level of engagement which does entail identification, *allegiance*.

⁴⁷ Smith utilizes this term in order to avoid the myriad implications of the term ‘identification.’ (2) Smith feels that the three levels of engagement, when taken together, may provide a “comprehensive theory of ‘identification.’” (73)

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 20-35 and 82-83.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 83.

The final level of Smith's model, allegiance, describes the process in which a spectator assesses a certain character's moral stance and, as a result, possibly develops an emotional connection to that character. In Smith's words,

[t]o become allied with a character, the spectator must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction. On the basis of this evaluation, the spectator adopts an attitude of sympathy [...] towards the character, and responds emotionally in an apposite way to situations in which this character is placed.⁵¹

This level is, according to Smith, the closest in nature to the popular conception of identification, "where we talk of 'identifying with' both persons and characters on the basis of a wide range of factors, such as attitudes and relations to class, nation, age, ethnicity, and gender."⁵² Smith's 'structure of sympathy,' then, is comprised of three levels, recognition, alignment, and allegiance, which work together as interlocking structures to create the possibility for emotional sympathy from a spectator to a character.

Smith's model of character engagement departs dramatically from the theoretical model most closely associated with the notion of 'identification' in film studies, the psychoanalytic approach. Arising largely from the 1970s work of Christian Metz,⁵³ Jean-Louis Baudry,⁵⁴ and Stephen Heath,⁵⁵ the psychoanalytic conception of film holds that identification is central to film spectatorship, and that there are two levels of cinematic

⁵¹ Ibid., 188.

⁵² Ibid., 84.

⁵³ Metz, Christian. *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. (1975) Trans. Celia Britton [...et al]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

⁵⁴ Baudry, Jean-Louis. "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" (1970) and "The Apparatus: Metaphysical Approaches to Ideology" (1975) in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. Ed. Rosen, Philip. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 286-298, 299-318.

⁵⁵ Heath, Stephen. "Narrative Space," and "On Screen, In Frame," in Heath, Stephen. *Questions of Cinema*. London: Macmillan, 1981, 19-75, 1-18.

identification. In the first, the spectator identifies with himself and his own ability to look as a “pure act of perception,”⁵⁶ and, in the act of looking, also identifies his or her look with the look of the camera. The spectator’s identification with the camera/projector further enables the spectator to identify with the fictional world of the film, both at the level of narrative and character. As the spectator experiences a film’s narrative, the film draws the spectator in by playing on the spectator’s desire to know, to see how it all turns out: “there is the desire for narrative itself as the wish to know.”⁵⁷ This movement of narrative “sets out a becoming”⁵⁸ for the spectator; the spectator becomes what the film wants through the act of identifying with both the movement of the story and the desires of the characters in the story.

The psychoanalytic understanding of cinematic identification rests on the idea that the spectator is drawn into a film because the filmic apparatus⁵⁹ plays on the subconscious desires of the spectator. The spectator is conceived as a subject effectively created by the operation of the film – a subject who mistakes itself for the transcendental “centre of representation”⁶⁰ of the film. The psychoanalytic approach to film claims that cinema “is ideological in that it creates an ideal, transcendental viewing subject [...] The apparatus ensures ‘the setting up of the “subject” as the active centre and origin of

⁵⁶ Metz, Christian. *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. (1975) Trans. Celia Britton [...et al]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, 49.

⁵⁷ Cowie, Elizabeth. *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 116.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁹ Describing the cinematic ‘apparatus’, Metz explains “[t]he cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry [...] it is also the mental machinery – another industry – which spectators ‘accustomed to the cinema’ have internalized historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films.” *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (1975) Trans. Celia Britton [...et al]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, 7.

⁶⁰ Creed, Barbara. “Film and Psychoanalysis.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Eds. Hill, John and Pamela Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 77-90, p. 80.

meaning.”⁶¹ This perception of the spectator as constituted solely by the action of a film is very different than Smith’s treatment of the spectator. Smith explicitly delineates his ‘structure of sympathy’ from the psychoanalytic approach:

The concepts of recognition, alignment, and allegiance denote not just inert textual systems, but responses, neither solely in the text nor solely in the spectator. This caveat is in part designed to distinguish my model of spectatorial engagement from ‘hypodermic’ models, in which the spectator is conceptualized as the passive subject of the structuring power of the text.⁶²

Smith objects to overwhelming power the psychoanalytic approach accords to films. Instead, he opines that ‘texts produce or deny the conditions conducive for various levels of engagement, rather than [...] enforce them.’⁶³ Smith’s model of character engagement envisions the film spectator as a conscious, active participant in the act of film spectating; from this perspective, film spectators bring their own intelligence and history to bear upon a film.

Akerman’s films similarly treat the spectator as a thinking, intelligent individual. As will be explored throughout this thesis, Akerman’s avoidance of reverse shots, and the resulting clear division between the space of the fiction and the space of the spectator, is a defining aspect of Akerman’s films: Janet Bergstrom writes, in Akerman’s films, “A choice has been made, and is continually manifested as we watch her films, *not* to draw the viewer into the psychological depths of dramatic verisimilitude. Instead, there is a

⁶¹ Ibid., 79. Creed is quoting Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” (1970) in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. Ed. Rosen, Philip. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

⁶² Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, 82.

⁶³ Ibid., 82.

split between what is represented and who is doing the representing.”⁶⁴ Akerman’s choice to divide the space of the spectator from the space of the fiction allows the spectator to maintain his or her own distinct vantage point on the film – the spectator is not ‘taken in’ by the film. The pace and action of Akerman’s films do not overwhelm the spectators’ ability to think about what they are watching. However, while this aspect of Akerman’s cinema is perhaps most clearly witnessed in the static camera placement, consistent medium shots, and lack of reverse shots found prominently in her 1970s films, the notion of allowing the subjectivity of her spectator to remain separate from the film is common to all of her films. Discussing *Un divan à New York* (1996), likely Akerman’s most classically constructed film, Jerry White writes that there is

[A]n ambiguity, discontinuity, and alienation effect born of the film’s cinematographic style. [... Therefore,] it becomes possible to see how the cinematography in *A Couch in New York* works against closure, stability, and viewer passivity. Akerman thus retains space for the subjectivity of the spectator even as she co-opts classical Hollywood forms.⁶⁵

Akerman’s films treat spectators as separate subjects who bring their own thoughts to the films. Because Akerman’s films view the spectator as a thinking, active subject, Smith’s model of character engagement provides a useful paradigm with which to analyze the ways Akerman presents her characters to the spectator of her films. Smith’s framework delineates three different levels of identification, providing a vocabulary with which to discuss a spectator’s conscious consideration of and emotional reactions to a character;

⁶⁴ Bergstrom, Janet. “Invented Memories” in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, 94-118, p. 101.

⁶⁵ White, Jerry. “Chantal Akerman’s Revisionist Aesthetic.” *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*. Eds., Petrolle, Jean and Virginia Wright Wexman. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2005, 47-68, pp. 63-64.

his concept of alignment will prove particularly helpful in examining Akerman's form of character presentation.

Smith's analysis of the three levels of character engagement in classical realist cinema⁶⁶ is important to this work in another way: Smith points out that allegiance is contingent upon character transparency. He writes that "[a]llegiance depends upon the spectator having what she takes to be reliable access to the character's state of mind, on understanding the context of the character's actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge."⁶⁷ In other words, in order to judge a character as worthy of attachment – as worth feeling for – the spectator must be able to analyze the thoughts, feelings and desires of a character against that character's actions. In order for a character to be a candidate for allegiance, the spectator must be given access to the inner life of a character.

There are various ways in which this access may be given to a spectator. The two most obvious avenues through which a film may dispense this information are dialogue and character action. Characters may directly explain their immediate feelings, their hopes for the future, or their memories of the past to another character or to the spectator through voice-over narration. Likewise, the way characters behave often provides information about how they feel about their goals, or else about other characters. Both

⁶⁶ Though Smith does address films which, to different extents, fall outside of the realm of classical cinema, his understanding of character is based in classical realist films, and is most generally applicable to those films. Robert Stam concisely describes the conventions of classical realist film as utilizing "an etiquette for introducing new scenes (a choreographed progression from establishing shot to medium shot to close shot); conventional devices for evoking the passage of time (dissolves, iris effects); conventional techniques to render imperceptible the transition from shot to shot (the 30 degree rule, position matches, direction matches, and inserts to cover-up unavoidable discontinuities); and devices for implying subjectivity (interior monologue, eyeline matches, empathetic music)." *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, 259. This set of standards will constitute what I refer to as classical realist cinema throughout this work.

⁶⁷ *Engaging Characters*, 84.

dialogue and action are delivered to the spectator through the auspices of the third avenue, performance style. An expressive and emotive performance style utilized by an actor can provide much knowledge about that character's state of mind; as Smith notes, "it seems clear that the function of performance has remained constant in classical cinema: the revelation of the interior states of the characters."⁶⁸ These three aspects of classical cinema work with and through the final two to give access to the subjective states of film characters.

A spectator may also gain information about characters from the relationships between characters, and the situations in which characters find themselves.⁶⁹ These narrative instances offer the spectator knowledge about characters' 'types' or roles (for example, the relations between a mother or a daughter, husband or wife, pursuing lover and his or her object of desire, hero and villain, etc.). This knowledge enables the spectator to attribute a character with characteristics, motivations, and goals that the spectator deems appropriate to the character's typology (for example, unconditional love between mother and daughter, romantic love between lovers, etc.). Finally, a film may allow access to a character's subjective viewpoint through the use of point of view, shot reverse-shot structures. By showing a shot of a character looking at something offscreen, followed by a shot of the object being looked at, and a final shot showing the initial character's reaction to the observed object, a film gives the spectator not only a chance to 'see' the object from the character's point of view, but also gives the spectator information about how that character feels about the object, as deduced from the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁶⁹ Describing what is necessary for a spectator to become involved in a film scene – or, in Smith's terminology, aligned with a character(s) – Aumont et al state that "all the audience requires to become inscribed within a scene is a structured network of relation, *a situation*." *Aesthetics of Film*. Trans. Neupert, Richard. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, 223.

character's reaction. These five devices⁷⁰ – dialogue, character action, performance style, character's situational placement, and POV shot structures – work together to reveal the internal world of characters to film spectators.

It is important to note here that, for every device mentioned above, excluding dialogue, information about a character's internal world is not given directly to the spectator. Instead, these devices function to allow the spectator to take his or her own interpretation of the character's behavior – either of the look on the character's face as she witnesses an event, the reason why she performed a certain action, or what it means that she is married – as true knowledge about that character's feelings or beliefs.⁷¹ Even if a film does not explicate a character's thoughts or feelings clearly, it must give the spectator the opportunity to guess the character's state of mind so as to entice allegiance between spectator and character. Bringing Judith Butler's understanding of ethics to bear here, it seems that the characters of classical realist cinema are under a demand to give an account of themselves (or to allow an account to be given on their behalf) – that such an account is a necessity for these fictional human beings to become 'individuals' we care about. The characters in Chantal Akerman's films diverge sharply from this set-up. Smith's model of character engagement and Butler's ethical model will provide the means with which to outline this divergence.

Akerman, Film, and Ethics

⁷⁰ There are, of course, aspects of classical realist film that contribute further to the construction of character's subjectivity which I am not addressing – for example, Smith discusses the impact of music on the possibilities for character allegiance. (151-152) The five aspects listed here are those most relevant to Akerman's filmmaking.

⁷¹ Smith writes that the spectator “uses cultural models and stereotypes to ‘fill out’ the information provided by the text [; because far] from being a hermetically closed system, the text relies upon assumptions and expectations brought to it by the spectator.” *Engaging Characters*, 19.

Chantal Akerman's filmmaking style includes a remarkable variety of aesthetics and focuses. Concordantly, various theoretical schools and critical approaches to film have examined different aspects of her films. A brief outline of Akerman's filmmaking and the critical responses to her films will provide necessary context for exploring character treatment in Akerman's films from the vantage point of ethics. Specifically, this outline of Akerman's work will supply context for Ivone Margulies' discussion of Akerman's 'aesthetic of homogeneity,' a concept which will be central to my analysis of Akerman's presentation of character.

Akerman's 1970s films are marked by the insistent use of a static camera, the avoidance of POV and shot reverse-shot structures and, as achieved through her use of long takes, a dramatic emphasis on duration. As such, Akerman's early films are generally considered avant-garde works, or more specifically, films expressing the influence of both North American Structuralist filmmaking and European modernist cinema. Ben Singer, for example, argues that what is perhaps Akerman's best known film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), is distinct in that it expresses features of both the American and European filmic avant-gardes. He writes, "like the American avant garde, it makes revelations about the physical and temporal basis of the medium, and like the European modernist cinema, it analyzes and undermines conventional codes of narrative form and meaning construction."⁷² Similarly, Ivone Margulies, in her study of Akerman's work, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, notes that some of the influences on Akerman's work include

⁷² Ben Singer. "Jeanne Dielman: Cinematic Interrogation and 'Amplification.'" *Millenium Film Journal* 22 (Winter/Spring 1989-1990): 56-75, p. 57.

both American Structuralist filmmaking and European modernist filmmaking, particularly the work of Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, and Jean-Luc Godard.⁷³

Akerman's films *La Chambre 1* (1972), *La Chambre 2* (1972), *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and *News from Home* (1977) clearly display a distinctive feature of the Structuralist exploration of cinema, an interest in the physical and temporal materiality of the cinematic medium. In return, the modernist influences in Akerman's films come more to the fore in *Jeanne Dielman*, *Saute ma ville* (1968), *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978), and *Je tu il elle* (1976). These modernist influences perhaps indicate why another critical school deeply invested in Akerman's work, feminist film criticism, has also claimed these latter films, along with *News from Home*. Much of the feminist discourse on Akerman's work has focused on her subversion of both classical cinema and the representation of the female form which has been traditionally presented in that cinema. For example, Margulies states that *Jeanne Dielman's* importance for feminist criticism lies in the fact that the film "is a paradigm of the much-desired alliance of two politics: that of feminism and that of anti-illusionism."⁷⁴ The predominance of female characters in Akerman's 1970s films and the attention these films give to questions of female subjectivity further explain the attraction of feminist critics to these films.⁷⁵

Many of Akerman's films have been labeled 'experimental' or 'feminist,' but much critical work on Akerman instead contends that Akerman's films resist being critically categorized at all. Addressing his "inability to firmly categorize" Akerman's

⁷³ For Margulies' discussion of Snow's influence, see pages 80-88 of *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*. For Margulies' discussion of Warhol's influence, see pages 36-41; for Godard, see pages 19-20 and 54-64.

⁷⁴ *Nothing Happens*, 5.

⁷⁵ For an example of this kind of criticism, see Sandy Flitterman-Lewis' article, "What's beneath her smile? Subjectivity and desire in Germaine Dulac's *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*." In *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Ed. Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, 27-40.

film *D'Est*, Michael Tarantino asserts that the emphasis on vision in Akerman's films "renders traditional generic categories [like 'fictional' or 'diaristic'] increasingly tenuous as one examines [Akerman's] oeuvre."⁷⁶ Jonathan Rosenbaum, in his analysis of Akerman's film *Night and Day* (1991), puts forward the notion that Akerman's films are best described in terms of interacting oppositions, rather than static categories. Rosenbaum proposes the oppositions of 'Painterly vs. Narrative,' 'France vs. Belgium,' 'being Jewish vs. being French and Belgian,' and 'the commercial vs. the experimental.'⁷⁷ The apparent difficulty of pinning down Akerman's style or series of concerns is a common aspect of the critical discussion of Akerman's work. Akerman's famous resistance to being labeled herself – something which Margulies refers to as "Akerman's resistance to neatly fitting "natural" (female, lesbian) or programmatic (feminist) categories" – reflects and extends this quality of her films as unclassifiable.⁷⁸

A brief illustration of the directions Akerman's cinema has taken since the 1970s will further underline the difficulties of applying rigid binaries or classifications in an analysis of Akerman's films. While early films like *Jeanne Dielman* and *Je tu il elle* are minimalist – a fact seen in Akerman's use of very few sets and little dialogue – her fictional films of the 1980s and 90s turn toward forms associated with excess and cliché: musicals (*Les années 80* [1983], *Golden Eighties* [a.k.a. *Window Shopping*, 1985]); romance (*Toute une nuit* [1982]); and comedy (*Nuit et jour* [1991], *divan* [1996], *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* [1984]). Akerman has also produced a series of documentaries which resemble both travelogue and diary films; these are *D'Est* (1993), *Sud* (1999), *De l'autre*

⁷⁶ Tarantino, Michael. "The Moving Eye: Notes on the Films of Chantal Akerman." In *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est*. Ed. Jenkins, Janet. Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1995, 47-55, p. 49.

⁷⁷ Rosenbaum, Jonathan. *Movies as Politics*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997, 41.

⁷⁸ *Nothing Happens*, 12.

côté (2002), and *Là-bas* (2006). Recently, Akerman has begun to work in the arena of visual art, producing installation pieces (*D'Est: Bordering on Fiction* [1995], *Women from Antwerp in November* [2008]). The combination of Akerman's typical subject-matter – Jewishness, domesticity, mother-daughter relationships, the relation between history and geography, sexuality, subjectivity – and her varied aesthetic approaches produce films which may seem to fall more or less within specific categories, but which ultimately resist conventional categorization.

The blurring of divisions between different cinematic styles in Akerman's work is important to this thesis in one specific way: Akerman's simultaneous straddling of the stylistic territories of both classical realist film and avant-garde film. Margulies discusses this aspect of Akerman's style in *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*. Here, Margulies argues that although Jean-Luc Godard's films have greatly influenced Akerman's filmmaking, Akerman is, nonetheless, 'post-Godardian.'⁷⁹ Whereas modernist filmmakers like Godard, Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, Yvonne Rainer, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet utilize a heterogeneous style which assumes, in Margulies' terminology, a 'didactic' stance towards the spectator,⁸⁰ Margulies illustrates how Akerman departs from the didactic stance by employing an 'aesthetic of homogeneity.' This aesthetic of homogeneity is more in line with the films of Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu, and Carl Theodore Dreyer.⁸¹ According to Margulies, "Akerman insists on simplified forms and singular characters and actors, as well as minimal variation in sets and locations. The tools with which she constructs an alternative to the

⁷⁹ *Nothing Happens*, 58.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

Brechtian/Godardian model are duration, accumulation, sobriety, and sameness.”⁸² For Margulies, Akerman’s aesthetic of homogeneity includes a “refusal to mediate between herself and others from *within the film*”; in other words, Akerman diverges from a Godardian aesthetic not only in her avoidance of a ruptured, juxtapositional film style but, concordantly, in the non-didactic nature of her films’ address.⁸³

The non-didactic nature of Akerman’s cinema is relevant to understanding both her relation to classical cinematic form and her form of character presentation. While Akerman’s 1970s films are certainly not classical Hollywood films, they are not entirely dissimilar from those films either. Margulies points out that Akerman’s homogenous aesthetic subtly undermines the conventions of classical cinema through their shared stylistic techniques:

[Akerman’s] 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 homogenous texture that subverts the codes of cinematic transparency from within.⁸⁴

Akerman’s cinema is superficially similar to classical cinema; the ways in which she actually undermines the conventions of classical cinema vary across Akerman’s different

⁸² Ibid., 58.

⁸³ *Nothing Happens*, 59.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 67.

films, but a homogenous, uniform nature remains a consistent element of her films' aesthetic.⁸⁵

Margulies' description of Akerman's filmic style is essential to discerning the function of character in Akerman's films. Margulies, in aligning Akerman with a post-Godardian aesthetic sets Akerman's stylistic approach apart from a Brechtian style.⁸⁶ A Brechtian mode of representation calls for the production of a "critical and self-conscious distance – by which art [draws] attention to its own construction, and thus the construction of 'reality'."⁸⁷ In terms of character presentation, this distance is produced through techniques which both create and continually disrupt identification between a spectator and character. By offering characters who are "incoherent, fissured, interrupted, multiple, and self-critical,"⁸⁸ works produced in this mode aim to constantly remind the spectator that characters are constructions, and not 'real' individuals. Such a description cannot be applied to character treatment in Akerman's films. While Akerman's characters are often 'odd,' and, if considered as real people, would likely be deemed unusual individuals, they are nonetheless coherent – they are continually recognizable as representation of individual human beings. This presentation of character is an effect of Akerman's aesthetic of homogeneity.

⁸⁵ As proof of the characteristic mentioned previously, this claim would need to be altered to include all of Akerman's films, most notably *The Eighties*. This film likely presents the biggest departure from Akerman's homogenous aesthetic, as it does emphasize rupture and a Brechtian mode of quotation. Specifically, because the construction of 'character' is not really employed in *The Eighties*, the film will not be directly analyzed here.

⁸⁶ Discussing this movement away from certain didactic, anti-illusionist film techniques associated with Brecht's epic theatre, Margulies notes, "[t]he 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.'" *Nothing Happens*, 59.

⁸⁷ Brooker, Peter. *A Glossary of Cultural Theory*, 218.

⁸⁸ Wollen, Peter. "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. Ed. Rosen, Philip. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 120-129, p. 122.

Akerman's presentation of character, like her films' homogenous aesthetic, is not identical to that found in classical realist cinema. The fact that Akerman presents characters which appear similar to those found in classical realist cinema – in other words, they seem 'realistic' – but which are not the same as those characters is of key importance to the ethical address of her films; Akerman's characters differ from those typically found in classical cinema, because their interior worlds remain opaque. As will be explored throughout this work, Akerman employs various stylistic devices in her films in order to present characters which, dissimilarly from those of classical realist cinema, have interior worlds of thoughts and feelings that are not transparent to the spectator. Departing from those classical Hollywood characters described by Smith as candidates for emotional identification because of their transparent subjectivities, Akerman's films often closely follow main characters whose desires and feelings are entirely opaque to the spectator. The following chapters will outline the different ways in which Akerman achieves this presentation of character in her films.

Akerman's Films: Aspects of the Ethical

In her films, Akerman provides characters which have interior worlds that are unknowable and opaque, often to the characters as well as the spectator. This provision expresses the idea that there are limits to what can be known of a human being's internal world of emotions and memories. In other words, Akerman's opaque characters reference the 'limits of knowability' described by Judith Butler. In Butler's opinion, accepting the limited nature of available knowledge about ourselves and others provides an ethical

resource; a resource which may enable human beings to recognize one another without the precondition of explaining one's subjectivity, or 'giving an account of oneself.' This work argues that Akerman's films, by presenting characters which seem 'real' but are yet unknowable, accord the spectator just such a chance to bestow recognition. This recognition is an opportunity to both apprehend the 'limits of knowability' of the characters, as representations of human beings, and to recognize and appreciate the singular value of those characters in spite of their limited knowability. This thesis will examine the connections between Akerman's films and Butler's arguments in order to further express the ethical nature of recognition, and how such recognition functions in Akerman's films.

The first chapter of my thesis, titled "Akerman's Ethics of Spectatorship: Recognizing the Other in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*," develops an extensive analysis of these films and their respective protagonists, Jeanne Dielman and Anna Silver. The chapter outlines the ways in which, in these films, Akerman denies the spectator access to Jeanne and Anna's interior world of thoughts and emotions; Akerman deploys devices in order to impede any sort of psychological understanding or interpretation of characters' motivations or feelings. Akerman achieves this using very little dialogue, by developing characters with contradictory and confusing desires, by maintaining visual distance from the characters through a systematic use of median or long shots and, finally, by having her actors utilize a minimalist and inexpressive performance style. At the end of these films, Anna reveals strong emotions and Jeanne performs a violent action, confronting the film spectator with narrative evidence of the existence of these characters' thoughts and desires. This

reminder of the fact that Anna and Jeanne do have interior worlds unsettles the spectator, making him or her ponder the impossibility of knowing the other. By presenting Anna and Jeanne as dependent on the spectator for recognition, Akerman also gives the spectator the opportunity to feel for the characters without knowing exactly what the characters feel. Examining these aspects of the films in conjunction with Butler's work will illuminate the ethical nature of Akerman's address of the spectator.

Chapter 2, "*Demain on déménage, Un divan à New York, and La captive: Akerman's Ethical Hollywood,*" investigates the nature of ethical address through the analysis three films by Akerman, *Demain on déménage, Un divan à New York, and La captive*. These films employ conventions traditionally associated with illusionist classical cinema and, thus, appear to stylistically depart from Akerman's minimalist 1970s cinema. Akerman's "realistic" films still present opaque, unknowable characters, however, through a repetitive use of dialogue, a specific presentation of social norms, and a focus on subject matter concerned with questions of how individuals come to know one another. The chapter will outline how Akerman, in these films, emphasizes the characters' unknowability to themselves as well as the spectator. These films, in their reminder to the spectator that their characters do have interior desires, hopes, and thoughts, ask the spectator to recognize the similarity between self and other – that, as one hopes for recognition as a valuable, singular human being, so does the other. These films provide the spectator the opportunity to recognize their characters as valuable and specific; a form of recognition characterized by Butler as ethical. In the process of bestowing such recognition, the spectator must abandon the demand to fully know the other, a demand which Butler shows to be fundamentally unethical. As will be shown in

Chapter 2, Akerman's *divan*, *Demain*, and *La Captive* provide the means, to varying degrees, for this type of ethical relation between spectator and character.

The concluding chapter, "Akerman and Ethical Cinema" positions the conceptual framework adopted in this thesis within the larger critical discussion of ethical philosophy and film studies. The chapter also addresses the question of Akerman's self-presentation as a character within some of her films through a close reading of *Là-bas* (2006), a film in which Akerman "performs" as an offscreen character, audible through voice-over dialogues. In *Là-bas*, Akerman presents herself in a similar manner to the characters in her other films; utilizing cliché and repetition in her dialogue, as well as attributing contradictory personality traits to herself, Akerman presents herself to the film spectator as unknowable. Through a detailed analysis of Akerman's self-presentation in this film, I examine how Akerman's presence in her films affects her spectatorial address as I have discussed it thus far, as well as the ethical nature of her films.

Characters in Akerman's films have interior worlds of thought and feelings that are private and unavailable to interpretation. In this respect, Akerman presents characters in, paraphrasing Butler, an ethical way, respecting the unknowable and private subjectivities of the self. This thesis will demonstrate how Akerman's creation of unknowable characters, by showing the spectator the impossibility of knowing the other, enables the film spectator to approach these characters in a similarly ethical manner, shedding the demand for the other to explain themselves.

Chapter 1: Akerman's Ethics of Spectatorship: Recognizing the Other in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*

The characters in Chantal Akerman's films resist being known. The reasons behind their actions, feelings, plans, desires are pieces of information that Akerman denies to her spectator. Akerman's denial of this information intimates that, as human beings, our ability to know another is limited, constricted, in some way. This intimation aligns Akerman's films with Judith Butler's recent claims about ethics, outlined in Butler's work *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). Here, Butler argues that recognizing and acknowledging that we can never fully know another human being provides an ethical resource; Butler claims that shedding the impossible demand for the other to explain themselves to us constitutes an ethical act, and presents new, positive possibilities for interactions between self and other. This chapter lays the claim that Akerman's films *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978)⁸⁹ address their spectators in a manner which is ethical; an analysis of the connections between Akerman's films and Butler's writing will draw out the ethical nature of these films' spectatorial address.

The Ethics of Accountability

In the aforementioned book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler outlines the need for a new conception of ethics, which takes into account the post-structural view of human subjectivity as decentered and ungrounded. Butler delineates her consideration of

⁸⁹ Hereafter referred to, respectively, as *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*.

ethics from the vernacular understanding of prescriptive morality, which relies on an assumed relation between personal agency, or freedom, and a resulting capacity to be held responsible for one's actions. Butler points out that to be held responsible is to be asked why one has done something, and to be asked that is to be asked to give an account of oneself – an account of one's thoughts, history, desires, and motivations. This view of the human subject as an accountable, unified and free agent clashes with the conception of the decentered subject as proposed in post-structural theory. Butler argues that giving the sort of account demanded by the question 'why did you do that?' is, in effect, impossible. Surveying recent critical theory and continental philosophy, she gives the following reasons for one's inability to describe one's subjective, inner world:

There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) *primary relations*, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my *partial opacity* to myself emerges. Lastly, there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the *structure of address* in which it takes place.⁹⁰

Butler asserts that this limited ability to describe oneself is a common, defining aspect of humanity. Acknowledging this commonality is, for Butler, an ethical act; such acknowledgment lies in discarding the expectation that the other can and should explain themselves.

⁹⁰ Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 39.

If we recognize that we cannot know and, therefore, cannot explain ourselves completely, Butler writes, “we cannot reasonably expect anything different from others in return.”⁹¹ That we cannot demand an explanation from the other presents a problem for responsibility: are individuals not responsible for their actions if they need not elucidate the reasons behind their actions? Butler, through a turn to French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, claims that this is not the case. One’s dependence on the other for recognition and sociality, and the influence of the other upon oneself from the beginning of one’s life, indicates that we are fundamentally tied to the other; the self cannot escape from the other. According to Levinas,⁹² our dependence on the other means that we are responsible for that other, regardless of how the other acts towards us. For Butler, the ethical lies in both accepting this responsibility towards the other and that, perhaps, self-preservation should not be our highest goal⁹³; an ethical understanding sees that we are always-already responsible, separate from any question of agency, in our fundamental relation with the other:

[We] are in our skins, given over, in each other’s hands, at each other’s mercy.

This is a situation we do not choose. It forms the horizon of choice, and it grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it creates the conditions under which we assume responsibility. We did not create it, and therefore it is what we must heed.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid., 42

⁹² Butler is particularly referencing the 1968 version of Levinas’ “Substitution,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, *Otherwise than Being, or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, and *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990, originally published as *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1976.

⁹³ Ibid., 100.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 101.

There is no need to demand an explanation from the other to make them responsible, as they are already responsible towards us. Ethical action is found in the understanding that we can only control our own actions, and we must bear the weight of responsibility toward the other.

For Butler, the ethical acceptance of our relation with the other is manifested in the act of ‘bestowing recognition’ on the other. Recognition here constitutes the moment in which we understand our need for the other, and the value of that specific unrepeatable individual, *in spite of* our inability to know that other. Akerman’s cinema presents opportunities for the spectator to consider these aspects of humanity which Butler describes – our inability to fully know ourselves and others, and our dependence on the other in our need for recognition – and to possibly perform the ethical act of bestowing recognition on unknowable characters. In the two films under discussion here, *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*, Akerman presents the characters of Jeanne Dielman and Anna Silver. These are characters that are in every scene of their respective films, and yet their motivations and internal workings remain unknown to the spectator. Though Jeanne and Anna are constantly onscreen, Akerman emphasizes their strangeness to the spectator through the characters’ silence, visual distance from the camera, odd behaviour, and lack of interaction with other characters. In the paradigm Akerman presents in these two films, the spectator is prevented from knowing or understanding Anna and Jeanne for the majority of the film and then, in the final minutes, is confronted with the question of his or her feelings towards that character. Akerman achieves this confrontation through the presentation of Anna and Jeanne performing extremely unusual acts – acts which imply that Anna and Jeanne *do* have interior worlds of thoughts and feelings – followed by a

prolonged period in which Anna and Jeanne, in close-up, sit silently, staring. As will be discussed in the next section, this model of character presentation differs greatly from classical realist cinema, in which spectators may judge the worth or value of a character, delineating the character as a candidate for identification, in the characters' display of feelings, motivations, or goals. In Akerman's ethical presentation of character the question becomes whether the spectator can confront the unknowability of the other, see the innate value in that other, and bestow recognition on that individual, or not.

Character and Identification in Classical Realist Film

Butler's ethical model places great importance on the interaction between self and other; for Butler, the 'ethical' lies in the possibility of bestowing recognition on the other in spite of that other's unknowability. Applying this model to film requires a critical framework which explains the interaction between spectator and film character. In *Engaging Characters* (1995), Murray Smith outlines just such a framework. Working from the perspective of cognitive-anthropology, Smith argues that, in the different ways spectators think about and react to characters, there are three levels of 'character engagement.' These are 'recognition,' 'alignment' and 'allegiance.'⁹⁵

Smith's understanding of the interaction between spectator and character is useful to this study of Akerman's work in different ways: unlike the psychoanalytic conception of the spectator, in which the spectator is thought to be subject to the structuring power of the text, Smith's model envisions the spectator to be a thinking, feeling individual, an individual who brings their own history and intelligence to bear upon a film. This

⁹⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of Smith's model, see pp. 19-20 of the Introduction.

provides a productive conception of the spectator of Akerman's films, as Akerman's films work to "[retain] space for the subjectivity of the spectator"⁹⁶ rather than overwhelm or distract the spectator from contemplating the film. Further, a conception of the spectator as a thinking, active participant is a necessary component for a discussion of ethical film-viewing, as ethical spectatorship requires conscientious and considerate spectators. Finally, Smith's discussion of the nature of allegiance is useful here. Smith, by and large addressing characters of classical realist cinema,⁹⁷ points out that, in this cinematic mode, emotional identification with a character is dependent on character 'transparency.' Smith's concept of allegiance underlines how the spectator requires "reliable access to the character's state of mind" in order to evaluate the character's thoughts, feelings and goals against the character's action; in this way the spectator determines whether the character is worth 'feeling for.'⁹⁸ In other words, the subjective interior world of a character must be made transparent to the spectator in order for the spectator to consider the character as worthy of empathy. Further outlining this notion of character transparency will be necessary to fully address Akerman's approach to character.

In classical realist cinema,⁹⁹ the use of dialogue constitutes the predominant avenue through which characters are presented as transparent. Characters, in their relation

⁹⁶ White, Jerry. "Chantal Akerman's Revisionist Aesthetic." *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*. Eds., Petrolle, Jean and Virginia Wright Wexman. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2005, 47-68, pp. 63-64.

⁹⁷ Though Smith does address some films which, to different extents, fall outside of the realm of classical cinema, his understanding of character is based in classical realist films, and is most generally applicable to those films.

⁹⁸ Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters*, 84.

⁹⁹ Robert Stam concisely describes the conventions of classical realist film as utilizing "an etiquette for introducing new scenes (a choreographed progression from establishing shot to medium shot to close shot); conventional devices for evoking the passage of time (dissolves, iris effects); conventional techniques to render imperceptible the transition from shot to shot (the 30 degree rule, position matches, direction matches, and inserts to cover-up unavoidable discontinuities); and devices for implying subjectivity

to other characters in the film, often clearly state information about their interiority; these statements may take the form of expressing current desires, motivations or goals, or describing a history that implies information about their current mental state. While provision of such dialogue presents the most direct explication of a character's interior world, the following methods of implying transparent character subjectivity rely on the spectator's interpretation of information concerning the character's internal state. These methods include the use of point of view shot structures and expressive acting styles to indicate and express character subjectivity: if a spectator is presented with a shot in which two characters embrace, followed by a close-up of another character breaking down into tears, the spectator would interpret the crying character as desiring the affections of one of the embracing characters, and as heartbroken by the event they are witnessing. If the crying character then acts in such a way to gain the affections of the character, the spectator would further interpret the crying character's actions as representative of that character's interior desire. Thus, character action constitutes a fourth avenue through which a character's subjective world may be made transparent to the spectator.

A final aspect of a transparent presentation of character requires emphasis here. This aspect is the way in which information about a character's subjectivity is expressed through their placement in different situations within the diegesis. Discussing the spectator's attraction to character and narrative, Aumont et al state that "all the audience requires to become inscribed within a scene is a structured network of relation, *a situation*."¹⁰⁰ This immediate inscription occurs because, in encountering a situation

(interior monologue, eyeline matches, empathetic music)." *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, 259. This set of standards will constitute what I refer to as classical realist cinema throughout this work.

¹⁰⁰ *Aesthetics of Film*. Trans. Neupert, Richard. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, 223.

onscreen, the spectator is confronted with very clear categories or ‘types’ of identity which that situation inscribes – mother and daughter, husband and wife, pursuing lover and object of desire, hero and villain, etc. These categories of identity allow the spectator to attribute the character with characteristics, motivations, and goals which the spectator deems appropriate to that type of character. In this conception, the spectator, Smith notes, “uses cultural models and stereotypes to ‘fill out’ the information provided by the text [; far] from being a hermetically closed system, the text relies upon assumptions and expectations brought to it by the spectator.”¹⁰¹ The spectator may be given very little diegetic information about a character’s psychological make-up, but the placement of characters in categories which reference the spectator’s extra-filmic knowledge can, again, allow the spectator to take, uncritically, their own interpretation or understanding of the situational position of a character as information about the internal state of that character.

According to Smith’s model of character engagement, this use of dialogue, point of view and close-up shots, performance style, character action and situational placement is necessary to align and possibly ally a spectator with a character. Returning to Judith Butler’s arguments, it is clear that the characters of classical realist cinema are under a demand to ‘give an account of themselves’: in Smith’s description, the spectator allies his or herself with a character according to the spectator’s analysis of where that character fits in the moral universe of the film. Such an analysis and judgment depends on the spectator’s access to the subjectivity of that character. This access is required, in effect, to judge the value of that character, to assess whether the character is worth the relation of allegiance. The spectator’s relation to a character – the way they consider this character

¹⁰¹ Smith, Murray, 19.

consciously after the film or during – is based on an assessment of value according to the account that character gives of themselves. An application of Butler’s notion of the ethical here reveals the fundamentally unethical nature of such a relation: the value of the other, the character, and the spectator’s inescapable relation to the social and that other, is denied unless the demand for an account of the other is met. This assessment of the relation between character and spectator in classical realist cinema will provide a necessary backdrop for the following analysis of Akerman’s cinema.

The relation between Akerman’s filmmaking and classical realist filmmaking will be explored in the next section, yet it is important to address the notion of ‘realistic’ character here. As Smith points out, the spectator must recognize a character as “a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space”¹⁰² in order for the character to become a candidate for sympathetic identification. This recognition of a character as a representation of a ‘real’ human being is dependent on conventions of film realism. These conventions, which “[evoke] the reconstitution of a fictional world characterized by internal coherence, plausible causality, psychological realism, and the appearance of a seamless spatial and temporal continuity”¹⁰³ allow the spectator to treat fictional characters as representative of individuals they would encounter in their day to day lives. This consideration of film characters as having a representative relation to actual human beings returns us to the arena of ethics. If a spectator conceives of their contemplation of a film character as in any way similar to their contemplation of actual individuals, then a consideration of a film character may be just as ethically charged as an

¹⁰² Ibid., 21.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 259.

encounter between individuals in the real world.¹⁰⁴ The relevance of classical realist conventions to Akerman's filmmaking and an ethical presentation of character will become clear in the following section; this section addresses the way in which Akerman's cinema negotiates a distinctive path between the divergent discourses of mainstream and avant-garde cinema.

Akerman and the Avant-garde(s)

Akerman's films of the 1970s seem in many ways radically different from films produced in the classical realist mode. Her insistent use of a static camera, avoidance of POV and shot-reverse shot structures and her emphatic use of long takes are particularly noticeable departures from classical cinema. Because of this, Akerman's early work has often been critically placed in the category of avant-garde filmmaking. This critical placement was often performed by feminist film critics, a critical school which has always been particularly invested in Akerman's work. Her films *Je tu il elle* (1974), *News from Home* (1976), and *rendez-vous* have all been discussed under a feminist rubric, but it is *Jeanne Dielman* that has been especially taken up by feminist critics. This has some relation to the film's subject matter – the film presents a female character borne down by the social forces and expectations working on her. Carina Yervasi, in her article “Dislocating the Domestic in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*” writes that “[t]he film, thus, is a feminist critique of both women's everyday experiences of domestic

¹⁰⁴ See Stadler, Jane. *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics*. New York, NY: Continuum, 2008. Stadler's work underlines the idea that film spectators may consider film characters in an ethical way, and this consideration may have an impact on the spectators' everyday lives.

oppression and of the systems of representation and of society.”¹⁰⁵ Akerman’s almost exclusive focus on female characters in her 1970s films emblemizes this critical feminist interest in her work.

Beyond subject matter, the feminist interest in Akerman’s films lay specifically in their subversion of classical cinematic forms, most notably her avoidance of reverse shots. As Janet Bergstrom notes,

Jeanne Dielman was seen as a model for a cinema of the future in which filmmakers would embrace women-centred means of expression as well as content. One of the aspects of Akerman’s visual style that was most noted was the separation she maintained between the visual field occupied by the camera...and the field observed by the camera. There is an absence of the conventional shot/reverse rhetoric of editing.¹⁰⁶

In her book *Women’s Cinema: The Contested Screen*, Alison Butler outlines how Akerman’s films have been taken up in the critical project of demarking a feminist counter-cinema. This is a cinema which, like avant-garde cinema, gains its meaning in both its opposition to and negation of dominant cinematic practices.¹⁰⁷ In both feminist and formalist discourses, then, Akerman’s early work has been discussed in relation to the categories of avant-garde and counter-cinematic practices.

¹⁰⁵ Yervasi, Carina. “Dislocating the Domestic in Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*.” *Sites: Journal of the Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies*. Vol. 4 Issue 2 (Fall 2000): 385-398, p. 386.

¹⁰⁶ Bergstrom, Janet. “Keeping a Distance.” *Sight and Sound*. Vol. 9 Issue 11 (Nov 1999): 26-28, p. 28. See also Bergstrom, Janet, “*Jeanne Dielman 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* by Chantal Akerman,” *Camera Obscura* 2 (Fall 1977): 115-121, p. 117 and Claire Johnston’s “Towards a Feminist Film Practice: Some Thesis,” *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols, vol. 2, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 315-326, p. 326.

¹⁰⁷ See particularly pages 6-8 in Alison Butler’s introduction. Butler, Alison. *Women’s Cinema: The Contested Screen*. London; New York: Wallflower, 2002.

Recent scholarship on Akerman's cinema, however, has moved to point out that Akerman's work does not fit so easily into the categories of avant-garde, modernist, or counter-cinematic feminist film, but instead challenges the borders of those categories. This critical work which places Akerman's work in a space between the two poles of classical film style and counter-cinema, a space in which she utilizes techniques from both styles simultaneously, destabilizing those techniques as she does so. In terms of Akerman's allegiance to feminist filmmaking, for example, both Ivone Margulies and Veronica Pravedelli argue for the inclusion of multifarious approaches to Akerman's cinema, pointing out that analyzing Akerman's work through a solely feminist approach cannot account for all the aspects of her films.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, discussing "Akerman's place in the avant-garde,"¹⁰⁹ Jerry White illuminates how the distinct combination of distance and emotion that Akerman employs in her films upsets any wholesale appropriation of her work by the categories of avant-garde or experimental film. Discussing this question in specifically feminist terms, Teresa de Lauretis also notes that Akerman's early films cannot be aligned with the "aesthetic of modernism or the major trends in avant-garde cinema" found in the films of Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, or Jean-Luc Godard, because of, among other things, Akerman's construction of a form of female address.¹¹⁰ These examples point to the fact that although Akerman's 1970's films may appear to be radically different from classical realist cinema, and therefore in line with the cinematic

¹⁰⁸ Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996 and Pravedelli, Veronica. *Performance, Rewriting, Identity: Chantal Akerman's Postmodern Cinema*. (2000) Torino: Otto Editore, 2008.

¹⁰⁹ "Chantal Akerman's Revisionist Aesthetic," 49.

¹¹⁰ de Lauretis, Teresa. "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory." *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, 127-148, pp. 130-131.

avant-garde typified by a filmmaker like Godard, such a clear alignment is not forthcoming.

The necessity of underlining the problematic association of Akerman with modernist or avant-garde cinemas lies in the association between those cinematic modes and the theories of Bertolt Brecht. In a representational approach informed by Brecht's writings, the goal is the exposure of the processes at work in the presentation of fiction in order to make clear the ideologies at work in so-called transparent, realistic representations. In terms of character presentation, these goals often take the form of manipulating a spectator's emotional identification with a character, sometimes abruptly disrupting that identification, in order to perpetually remind the spectator that he or she is watching an actor participating in a fiction, disallowing any confusion of that actor with an autonomous, independent person. Discussing this technique as used in the films of Godard, Peter Wollen points out that for the spectator, "it is impossible to maintain "motivational" coherence when characters themselves are incoherent, fissured, interrupted, multiple, and self-critical"¹¹¹ – in other words, the spectator does not conceive of characters presented in a Brechtian format as representations of 'real' people.

Wollen's description of characters presented in a Brechtian mode clearly diverges from the coherent, singular characters of Anna and Jeanne. Unlike Brechtian self-reflexive characters, these are figures that are assimilable to the narratively and psychologically coherent characters of classical cinema, even though they are also, to some extent, sharply divergent from those characters. In order to explain further the double nature of character presentation in Akerman's films, it is necessary to look more

¹¹¹ Wollen, Peter. "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. Ed. Rosen, Philip. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986: 120-129, p. 122.

closely at some of the claims Ivone Margulies makes concerning Akerman's approach to filmmaking.

In *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (1996), Margulies astutely describes Akerman's filmmaking style as employing an 'aesthetic of homogeneity.' While acknowledging filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's influence on Akerman, Margulies ultimately claims that Akerman is post-Godardian¹¹²: whereas filmmakers like Godard and Yvonne Rainer utilize an 'aesthetic of heterogeneity,' which foregrounds rupture and Brechtian reflexive strategies, Akerman, in line with filmmaker Robert Bresson, "insists on simplified forms and singular characters and actors, as well as minimal variations in sets and locations. The tools with which Akerman constructs an alternative to the Brechtian/Godardian model are duration, accumulation, sobriety and sameness."¹¹³ Margulies' discussion of the homogenous texture of Akerman's films here illuminates both Akerman's distance from a Brechtian approach and her relation of similitude to classical illusionism. Rather than providing a cinematic form whose meaning is constructed in its constant, obvious critique and deconstruction of cinematic realism, *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*'s departures from classical cinema are far more subtle; in a cosmetic sense, Akerman's films share similarities with classical realist cinema. In fact, Margulies notes that it is Akerman's over-compliance with the demands of classical cinema which produces the unsettling excess in her films.¹¹⁴ She writes,

Her twisting of narrative takes place through the selection and amplification of devices usually associated with conventional Hollywood narrative. She hyperbolizes

¹¹² *Nothing Happens*. See 54-64 particularly.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁴ "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." *Ibid.*, 58.

perspective, linear chronology, ellipsis, and the naturalistic conventions of having single actors perform single characters. Insisting on, indeed amplifying narrative elements, Akerman defines a homogenous texture that subverts the codes of cinematic transparency from within.¹¹⁵

As the overall structures of Akerman's films present a superficial similarity to classical realist filmmaking practices, so as well does that contingent element of the overall structure, her presentation of character.

Akerman's characters are distinct from the Brechtian characters of some modernist, counter or avant-garde cinema, sharing an affinity with the individuated, continuous characters of realist narrative cinema which populate 'realistic' film worlds. But this affinity between Akerman's characters and characters of classical realist cinema is a surface level similarity – it is the differences which are of utmost importance to the question of ethics in Akerman's films. Unlike the characters of popular narrative cinema, the value and importance of which are determined, for the film and spectator, by the characters' transparency and openness to the spectator's interpretation, the characters of Anna and Jeanne are radically opaque. As will be explored further in the following sections, Akerman deploys a number of devices which instead deprive the film spectator of any psychological insight into characters' motivations, feelings or thoughts. Such devices include avoidance of any dialogue which would reveal or point to a character's subjective viewpoint, the use of an inexpressive performance style, the lack of subjective POV shots, and supplying contradictions and inconsistencies in terms of the characters' narrative or psychological goals and actions (preventing the spectator from categorizing the characters). In *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*, Akerman both utilizes and upsets

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 67.

spectators' expectations of classical film structure in order to present characters that, while still recognizable as representations of 'real' people, deny spectators' expectations of transparency. That Akerman, in the final moments of these films, presents the spectator with the opportunity to consider the characters as worthy of feeling in spite of the characters' opacity constitutes evidence of the ethical nature of Akerman's films.

Much of the ongoing critical discussion of Akerman's filmmaking has been concerned with the nature and representation of identity in Akerman's films. Analyzing Akerman's representation of identity is important here again, however; a discussion of the ways in which Akerman's presentation of character utilizes the conception of realistic characters (characters who meet the conventional criteria of realistic representation and, thus, can be seen as analogues of human beings) has been downplayed in favour of addressing the way Akerman's use of the aforementioned techniques subverts the notion of realistic character. Akerman creates a certain tension in putting forward characters which seem recognizable from the perspective of classical cinema (that is, which follow that cinema's rules of diegetic plausibility) but which yet deny us the subjective access we expect from characters which occupy a homogenous, coherent diegesis. It is this tension that I wish to illuminate and explore here for the purpose of outlining the ethical aspects of Akerman's character presentation. The following section consists of an extensive examination of *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*. This analysis will lay out the various ways in which Akerman presents her characters as opaque, and, finally, the potential of this type of character presentation for an ethical understanding of identification processes in film.

Jeanne and Anna: Presenting the Unknowable

In *Jeanne Dielman*, the spectator witnesses three days in the life of Jeanne, a widowed Belgian housewife. Jeanne keeps house and performs domestic duties within a ruthless, self-imposed routine which accounts for every minute of her day. In the afternoon, while her teenage son Sylvain is at school, she works as a prostitute in order to support herself and her son. During the afternoon of the second day, Jeanne's order starts to break down; she begins to make mistakes, burning her potatoes, leaving lights on in unoccupied rooms, and mis-buttoning her clothing. This unraveling culminates on the third day, when the spectator witnesses Jeanne having sex with a male client (the first time the film has shown us this act) and she appears to experience an orgasm.¹¹⁶ Afterwards, Jeanne picks up a pair of scissors and stabs the male client to death. In the final scene, Jeanne sits at her dining room table, immobile, for many minutes, staring.

The main character in *rendez-vous* is Anna Silver, a film director traveling across Europe with her most recent film. Anna travels from Cologne to Brussels to Paris by train, staying in various hotels. As she travels, she meets with five other characters: Heinrich, a German teacher; Ida, an old friend of Anna's family; a man on the train, who has traveled the world; her mother; and Daniel, her boyfriend. These characters, particularly the first three, speak at length about various things, and Anna listens quietly. This state of affairs changes during the last two visits, however, as Anna becomes more expressive. Anna finally returns to her own apartment and, at the end of the film, listens

¹¹⁶ Brenda Longfellow discusses the fact that Jeanne's reaction is uncertain and may either be one of pleasure or pain and disgust, and the understanding varies from spectator to spectator. "Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman." *Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory*. Vol. 13 No. 1-2 (1989): 73-90, p. 84.

to the numerous messages left on her answering machine. One of the messages belongs to an Italian woman with whom Anna has had a brief affair, and whom Anna has been trying unsuccessfully to contact over the course of the film.

During the first two-thirds of *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*, Anna and Jeanne are similarly presented as opaque and inscrutable characters. Reviewing *rendez-vous*, Marsha Kinder writes,

Conventional dramatic features have trained us to expect to meet protagonists early in the narrative and immediately love them, partly by identifying them with ourselves or other loved ones from our personal past. This means that we really don't have to get to know the protagonists, for we can project qualities onto a two-dimensional figure in conventional situations and feel that we've known her for ages! But in this film we are forced to get to know Anna in an unusual way – partly because she is onscreen alone so much of the time...and partly because her qualities are revealed very gradually.¹¹⁷

As Kinder aptly conveys, Akerman denies the spectator any easy identification with Anna. Instead, the film spectator 'get[s] to know Anna in an unusual way.' This unusual access to Akerman's characters results from a spatial and temporal alignment which simultaneously disallows the spectator any diegetic information concerning Anna or Jeanne's interior worlds. Akerman creates this alignment through the use of various devices. This section will outline and describe these devices individually in their relation to Anna and Jeanne.

¹¹⁷ Marsha Kinder. "Review [*Les rendez-vous d'Anna*]." *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979): 40-46, p. 42.

The first and the most pervasive strategy of character presentation in Akerman's films has to do with camera distance and movement. In her films, Akerman generally places her camera at a distance and avoids subjective point of view shots, close-ups, or shot reverse-shot structures. This filmmaking style avoids, as Ben Singer suggests, any inflection of the surface of the film's world with meaning.¹¹⁸ In *rendez-vous*, Akerman does move the camera into the diegetic space in the final third of the film (the implications of which will be discussed in the following section), but otherwise Akerman is rigorous in maintaining a distanced view on the fictional space of her films. The spectators' enforced distance from characters denies them any possibility of using Anna or Jeanne's facial expressions or body language to produce meaning (in this case, to 'understand' these characters' state-of-mind). Akerman's camera usage is the first of the many devices she employs in order to present opaque characters.

Another strategy of character presentation found in *rendez-vous* and *Jeanne Dielman* is the narrative foregrounding of scenes in which Anna and Jeanne are alone. In classical cinema, a character's interactions with other characters may diegetically provide information to the spectator about the character's feelings about the interaction, either through dialogue or performance. However, as Kinder points out, in *rendez-vous* Anna spends much of her time alone. This is even truer of Jeanne, as she rarely leaves her house. That Akerman privileges the moments in which the women do not interact with others undermines the spectator's ability to quickly 'read' Anna or Jeanne's place in the film's world and glean information from that categorization. Akerman emphasizes Anna and Jeanne's isolation by eliding moments when the plot would call for Anna and Jeanne

¹¹⁸ Singer, Ben. "Jeanne Dielman: Cinematic Interrogation and 'Amplification.'" *Millenium Film Journal* 22 (Winter/Spring 1989-1990): 56-75, p. 60.

to interact with other characters. In *Jeanne Dielman*, this elision is most explicit in the absent bedroom scenes with Jeanne's male clients. In *rendez-vous*, Akerman denies the spectator access to any instances of Anna 'at work;' we never see Anna in a movie theatre as she presents her films. As such, we cannot gather any information about what 'kind' of director Anna is, among other things. Akerman's insistence on presenting her characters in solitary situations disallows the spectator the ability to identify Anna or Jeanne with either the spectator's self, other individuals, or other sorts of individuals they may have encountered elsewhere.

Anna and Jeanne do, however, come into contact with other characters over the course of the films' narratives. Anna spends time with five different characters whom she encounters, and Jeanne spends her evenings with her son, interacts with shopkeepers, and babysits the infant child of a female neighbor. Anna and Jeanne's meetings with other characters hint to another device Akerman employs in her approach to character presentation. This device is the attribution of contradictory personality characteristics to Anna and Jeanne. In her analysis of *rendez-vous*, Angela Stukator argues that Akerman's film works against the 'logic of identity:' "a logic which dictates that the critic emphasize elements (textual or extra-textual) of coherence, unity and wholeness."¹¹⁹ Stukator points out that one avenue which upsets this logic is the promotion of "internal differences, contradictions and tensions which could potentially blur the boundaries of a category."¹²⁰ Akerman employs such tensions and contradictions to prevent either Anna or Jeanne from being placed in any category which might enable a spectator to 'fill in' information concerning the subjective interior world of that character.

¹¹⁹ Stukator, Angela. "Critical Categories and the (Il)logic of Identity." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*. Vol. 2 Issue 2/3 (1993): 117-128, p. 118.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

There are numerous aspects of the character of Anna which make it difficult for the film spectator to categorize her. In part, Anna's resistance to categorization is the result of Akerman's distanced camera: while watching the film, it is difficult for the spectator to gain a sense of Anna's identity through physical or cultural connotations. Anna seems graceful in one scene and frumpy and awkward in the next. As such, Akerman discourages any attempt to attach even basic categories of physical appearance – such as 'beautiful' or 'plain' – to Anna early in the film. Another difficulty the film spectator encounters in identifying Anna is the character's constant travelling. Anna's peregrination preempts any attempt to label her as having a specific national identity. Her persistent travelling further denies the spectator the sight of Anna in any sort of inhabited space; as such, we receive none of the information about Anna's habits or preferences that her traces on a lived-in space might otherwise reveal to us.

Akerman's presentation of Anna's desire also contributes to the difficulty of categorizing Anna. Anna's interactions with other characters do provide evidence of her desires, which could be taken as an expression of Anna's interiority. Instead of clearly illuminating the character's interior state, Anna's contradictory actions again only problematize any undertaking to place Anna in a simplistic category of identity. This is particularly clear in Anna's expression of sexual desires, which involves various sexual preferences, as well as tentative or confused sexual drives. Early in the film, Anna actively engages in an affair with Heinrich, inviting him back to her hotel room. Minutes later, she just as actively ends the affair, citing the fact that "we don't love each other," as though this information has more bearing on the situation now than it had when Anna invited Heinrich home. Anna's mother's friend Ida, upon meeting Anna, complains of

Anna twice breaking an engagement with Ida's son; clearly Anna's desire is oscillating and transitory in nature.

Any understanding of Anna's desire is further complicated when, later on, Anna meets her mother. As they lie together in a hotel bedroom, Anna recounts her affair with an Italian woman, adding that, 'for some reason,' she thought of her mother during the encounter. Anna's comment, implicitly hinting at incestuous fantasies, serves the purpose of problematizing the reading of these characters as traditional figures of 'mother' and 'daughter.' Anna's ephemeral and contradictory desires again prevent any easy categorization of Anna, disallowing the spectator the means to 'understand' Anna or predict her behaviour. This is underscored in Anna's final meeting with Daniel. Anna's involvement with this man, who is presumably her boyfriend, appears to the spectator as rather inexplicable. A petulant man who demands attention from Anna while simultaneously rejecting her, Anna's choice to spend time with Daniel is confusing to the film spectator, at best. It is also difficult to think of Anna as someone who wishes to remain single and unattached – for instance, her remarks to the hotel clerk that she would have named her daughters Judith and Rebecca, if it had been the right time to have them, suggests that Anna would not be completely opposed to having a family or domestic life.

In *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman assigns Jeanne blurred and contradictory aspects of identity in a manner which differs from her presentation of Anna. This difference is most obvious in the fact that Akerman never gives the spectator any indication that Jeanne harbours desire for or attraction to any other character in the film. But just as Anna's desires only further deny the spectator an understanding of her interiority, Jeanne's relation to the space she inhabits produces a similar effect.

Unlike Anna, Jeanne spends the majority of her time in a domestic space. In the first half of the film, the spectator might likely surmise that, from Jeanne's imposition of a strict order on that apartment, Jeanne has a compulsive personality. However, as the film continues, this easy understanding of Jeanne is undone. As Judith Mayne notes, there is a quality of narration in the film separate from Jeanne's behaviour, and this often takes the form of the film's representation of the rest of the apartment;¹²¹ Jayne Loader writes that "the apartment seems to have a life of its own, to have needs and demands which manipulate Jeanne."¹²² As it becomes evident to the spectator that Jeanne's routine is slowly breaking down, our assessment of Jeanne's personality fails us. Jeanne cannot perform her routine perfectly anymore. Is this because of some external force, some drift of the apartment towards disorder, which Jeanne has been fighting against? The film never gives a specific reason for the disintegration of Jeanne's order, leaving the spectator to wonder. Akerman's refusal to provide clear reasons for the breakdown of Jeanne's routine only underlines the audience's complete lack of access to Jeanne's subjective viewpoint. Any understanding that a spectator may have attributed to Jeanne based on an early assessment of her relation to the space around her – that she is 'compulsive,' for example – is disrupted by the revelation that we have no easy understanding of why Jeanne's routine breaks down. There are also other aspects of Jeanne's personality that indicate 'internal differences, contradictions and tensions,' thus keeping Jeanne resistant to any attribution of a subjectivity characteristic of a certain

¹²¹ "Given the extent to which the character of Jeanne occupies screen time in the film, it is perhaps tempting to read the narration in terms uniquely of her activities. But as the game of disappearing chairs indicates quite emphatically, the representation of Jeanne's activities is only one part of the larger narrative of the film." Mayne, Judith. *The Woman at the Keyhole*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 207.

¹²² Loader, Jayne. "Death in Installments." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 16 (Nov 1977): 10-12, p. 11.

category, and these aspects inform the next two techniques that Akerman employs in the service of safeguarding the opacity of her characters.

Referencing the aforementioned reliance of classical realist cinema on dialogue as a tool to reveal character subjectivity, Stukator notes that another way in which a filmmaker may work against the logic of identity is by avoiding dialogue altogether:

While the questions [of identity] are raised primarily through stylistic and formal strategies, it is crucial to note that they may also emerge in elements such as gestures, silences, or pauses. These elements constitute a challenge to the representational norm inasmuch as they have remained unrepresented within the legitimized and available circuit of images and sounds.¹²³

Anna and Jeanne's silence presents a direct refutation to the expectation that, as the main character in a film, they will make their inner feelings available to the spectator. This is particularly evident in the scenes where Anna and Jeanne remain silent in the presence of others. When Anna listens silently as others speak, or else when Jeanne sits silently in the company of her son, the spectator is deprived of knowing what either character feels about the situation they are in, and if they feel anything at all. In Jeanne's case particularly, Akerman's presentation of Jeanne as largely silent in the company of her son upends stereotypical notions of family and domesticity (as spaces of openness or safety and security), pointing out the possibly isolating and repressive effects of such structures.

Anna and Jeanne's silence contributes to these characters' opacity. Akerman, however, also utilizes dialogue to serve the same function. Anna and Jeanne are not silent for the length of their respective films – Anna speaks to a hotel clerk early in the film and more and more in the last two meetings, and Jeanne speaks at length to a store clerk in

¹²³ Stukator, 123.

the latter half of *Jeanne Dielman*. At the most basic level, these examples again prevent the spectator from identifying Jeanne or Anna simply as ‘quiet people,’ but Akerman’s work is more complex than that. As Margulies discusses,¹²⁴ the instances in which Anna speaks to the hotel clerk and Jeanne to the store clerk indicate an excess of information and a seeming lack of social awareness and propriety; these instances are “easily read as signs of some psychological disability.”¹²⁵ As Akerman’s use of both silence and dialogue prevent any easy identification with Anna or Jeanne as ‘listeners’ or ‘observers,’ we cannot attach our own understanding of those categories to Anna or Jeanne’s subjectivity.

In classical cinema expressive acting style provides another fundamental aspect of alignment, in which a spectator may read the ‘internal’ emotions of a character through information the actor reveals physically. In terms of performance style, Akerman’s 1970s films depart radically from classical realist cinema. In *Jeanne Dielman*, Delphine Seyrig, as Jeanne, does not use (for the majority of the film) any gestural or facial expression which might indicate or depict her mental state – the exception being the orgasm Jeanne (possibly) experiences with the third male client, in which Jeanne’s reaction cannot be definitively understood as either pleasure or pain.¹²⁶ Aurore Clément performs Anna as inscrutable for the first two-thirds of the film; her face is consistently blank, expressionless. Meg Morley remarks that “Aurore Clément has chosen a certain retreating camera presence;” as well, “a certain awkwardness in the acting is allowed to appear – Aurore Clément looks unused to the high heels she is wearing, she speaks

¹²⁴ *Nothing Happens*, 154-161.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹²⁶ Again, see Brenda Longfellow’s “Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman” for further discussion (84).

woodenly at first, her face is quite blank.”¹²⁷ Anna and Jeanne’s blank faces, and the restriction of their gestures to activities with an obvious diegetic function in the film, clearly deny the spectator any moments of insight into Anna or Jeanne’s subjective viewpoint. The performance style Clément and Seyrig employ maintains the opacity of the two characters against any inferential attribution of subjectivity.

That Anna and Jeanne do not articulate identifiable emotions on either their face or through their bodies is again emphasized and supported by the distance of Akerman’s camera from Anna and Jeanne. The visual track of these films, however, does not comprise the entirety of the characters’ inexpressiveness: the flat, monotone way in which Anna and Jeanne speak also voids their few comments of any emotional inflection. In Jeanne’s case particularly, the flat nature of her speech destabilizes the referential quality of her dialogue, adding again to the contradictory nature of Jeanne’s character.¹²⁸ During dinner on the first night, as Sylvain discusses his goal of being able to speak Dutch without a French accent, Jeanne replies, “no one forced you to go to a Flemish school.” Any notion that Jeanne has a preference concerning Sylvain’s schooling is removed from this statement, however, by the absolutely flat tone in which Seyrig delivers the line, leaving the spectator to wonder why Jeanne made the remark at all. In a similar vein to Anna’s expressions of desire, Jeanne’s seeming preference cannot so easily be linked to the expression of an identifiable, internal state of mind, and hence does not provide the material basis for an identification with Jeanne.

¹²⁷ Morley, Meg. “*Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* (Chantal Akerman).” *Camera Obscura* 3-4 (1979): 211-215, pp. 214-215.

¹²⁸ In *Nothing Happens*, Margulies discusses the ways in which Akerman’s use of dialogue downplays the referential quality of the dialogue, and instead emphasizes the materiality of the spoken word. See 153-160.

Delphine Seyrig and Aurore Clément perform the characters of Anna and Jeanne in such a way as to deny the spectator any access to their subjective state of mind. And yet, the characters do not lose or fully depart from their function as analogues of human beings. In her discussion of the performance style of the actors in Akerman's 1970's films, Laleen Jayamanne applies the terminology of 'matrixed' acting (fully integrated, illusionist melding of actor and character) vs. 'non-matrixed' acting (Brechtian, with the aim of disallowing any fusion between actor and character) to Seyrig's performance, and concludes that "Seyrig constructs the character of Jeanne Dielman in a mode of performing which is close to the non-matrixed end of the continuum, though it cannot be reduced to non-matrixed acting because we do perceive Seyrig as Jeanne Dielman; she is matrixed."¹²⁹ Jayamanne is particularly discussing Jeanne here, but she further notes that there are shared aspects and a 'continuity' between Seyrig's performance and Aurore Clément's performance as Anna.¹³⁰ Jayamanne's distinction is an important one: the inexpressive performances of Clément and Seyrig do undermine the total, illusory fusion of character and actor a spectator would find in classical cinema, but this destabilization does not erase or destroy our understanding of Anna or Jeanne as characters/analogues of human beings. Jeanne and Anna may be excessively inexpressive, but they do not disintegrate into 'the actresses Aurore Clément and Delphine Seyrig' playing 'Anna' and 'Jeanne' – they remain Jeanne and Anna, unassailable in their opacity.

The characters of Anna Silver and Jeanne Dielman are not aligned, or allied, with the spectator in the sense Murray Smith describes, that is, as an identification between

¹²⁹ Jayamanne, Laleen. "Modes of Performance in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*." *Toward Cinema and Its Double: Cross-Cultural Mimesis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, 149-160, p. 153.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

spectators and characters in classical narrative cinema. Akerman categorically troubles any avenue by which spectators could assess the internal state of mind of a character and then use that information to ally themselves with that character. According to Smith, identification or engagement with characters ranges from brief, even momentary alignments to possible allegiance. Allegiance occurs if a spectator develops a particular preference for, or attraction to, a character, of which he or she may be more or less aware. Before exploring the function of allegiance in terms of the ethical address of Akerman's early films, an examination of one more aspect of identification and character presentation – that of narrative identification – is in order.

Psychoanalytic approaches to film claim that identification with characters is only one aspect of the pleasurable nature of identification in classical cinema.¹³¹ Another aspect, relevant here, is the notion that the spectator may identify with the narrative movement of the film: with the position of 'coming to know' how the story ends, with the pleasure of seeing the narrative return to its originary stasis.¹³² This point is germane to Akerman's films because *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous* are narrative films, albeit with narratives which are far less dramatic and overt than those found in classical cinema. Akerman's use of narrative again reflects the permeable border between Akerman's films and the conventions of classical realist film. As Ben Singer writes, "[*Jeanne Dielman*] is an unusual example of a film depicting a fictional, chronological, coherent, single diegesis – the staple of conventional cinema – that nevertheless manages to exploit its narrative as a reflexive element."¹³³ Both of these films present narrative action with

¹³¹ See Cowie, Elizabeth. *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 116-117.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 116-117.

¹³³ Singer, 70.

which the spectator may identify (Anna's journey towards her home and the slow disintegration of Jeanne's domestic routine, among other things), but this does not alleviate the tension of the opacity of Anna and Jeanne. Rather, the narratives exacerbate it. These films are completely tied to Anna and Jeanne: their narratives may serve to allow the identification which has been denied in terms of character – keeping the spectator from disengaging from the films completely – but they do not present any major distractions from the fact that the spectator only spends time with Anna and Jeanne, and yet does not come to 'know' either of these characters.

Ethical Identification

Akerman's presentation of the characters of Anna and Jeanne as described so far does not remain entirely opaque for the length of these films. The spectator's relationship to Anna and Jeanne is altered during the final third of *rendez-vous* – when Anna spends the night with her mother and then Daniel – and the final minutes of *Jeanne Dielman*, when Jeanne quietly and methodically stabs her final male client to death. Prior to these events, it may have seemed reasonable to conclude that the characters of Anna and Jeanne had no subjectivity or interiority at all, that Akerman was presenting merely the surface of characters. However, as will be explored in greater detail, the actions of the characters at the end of these films confront the spectator with the fact that Anna and Jeanne, in correspondence with the human beings they represent, *do* have an interior world, an impenetrable world of desires, motivations, and emotions. Patrick Kinsmen reflects this realization in his discussion of *Jeanne Dielman*: “the film's most fictive

moment (the murder, which is obviously not “real” but which is still registered in the same minimalist camera style) both breaks the naturalist “spell” of the film’s first three hours and seems desperately to need interiority so as to become comprehensible.”¹³⁴

While spectators may, if they so choose, ignore or de-emphasize Akerman’s denial of access to Anna and Jeanne’s subjective viewpoints for the majority of these films, the inaccessibility of these characters’ interior worlds becomes unavoidably central in the latter parts of *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*. This is because these films’ final moments confront spectators with the knowledge that they have no recourse to the characters’ interior worlds in order to understand or judge those characters and their actions.

As will be explored in the following sections, Akerman’s confrontation of the spectator with Jeanne and Anna’s unexplainable actions at the end of these films points to Judith Butler’s discussion of ethics. Up until this point in the films, Akerman’s characters have, unlike the transparent characters of classical cinema, refused the spectator’s demand to give an account of themselves. It is these final moments of *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous* which make the spectator aware of the fact that he or she is making that demand in the first place, and which also put the spectator in a position to examine what might happen when that demand will not or cannot be answered. *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*’s endings point at a crucial issue: the ethical imperative implicit in the film spectator’s efforts to understand character’s psychology. The hermeneutic “need” to make sense of a character’s behavior or actions is, ultimately, an ethical demand that the film spectator makes to characters as “Others.” By denying access to such understanding,

¹³⁴ Kinsmen, Patrick. “She’s Come Undone: Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*, 23 *Quai du Commerce*, 1080 *Bruxelles* (1975) and *Countercinema*.” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, Vol. 24 Issue 3 (July 2007): 217-224, p. 219.

Akerman puts the film spectator in a position equivalent to what Butler describes as the breakdown of ethical relations. Butler writes,

[T]he question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received.¹³⁵

This ‘site where we ask ourselves’ is what Akerman lays out in the final moments of her films – moments in which Jeanne sits at her dining room table for seven minutes after killing a man and Anna sings a song.

Jeanne Dielman: The Unknowable Character

In her article “What’s beneath her smile? Subjectivity and desire in Germaine Dulac’s *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*,” Sandy Flitterman-Lewis analyzes Akerman’s films from a perspective very similar to what has been under discussion here. Discussing Akerman’s withholding of information about Jeanne’s subjectivity, Flitterman-Lewis argues that spectators must construct Jeanne’s ‘mental universe’ from their own guesses concerning Jeanne’s state of mind; that Akerman’s long takes recording Jeanne’s actions “invite the viewer’s speculation about Jeanne’s thoughts – she has to be thinking something – as she

¹³⁵ *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21.

accomplishes each task.”¹³⁶ Flitterman-Lewis notes that, as the film reaches its apex, this process becomes more central:

This character, who is only seen in surfaces, suddenly gains incredible depth by virtue of the viewer’s attributions. We imagine “what she’s thinking”, put ourselves inside her head [...] and no response is posed [...] A depth of experience and feeling is attributed to this character whose interiority the film had worked so hard to deny.¹³⁷

Flitterman-Lewis’ assessment of the spectator’s drive to guess at what could be going through Jeanne’s mind is accurate and useful here; however, for the purpose at hand, it is necessary to emphasize one aspect of Flitterman-Lewis’ account in particular – the fact that ‘no response is posed’ to the spectator’s guesses. The radicalism of this moment of *Jeanne Dielman* lies not in its encouragement of the spectator’s guesses, but in the way this scene completely denies any attempt to uncritically attach those guesses to Jeanne’s subjectivity as a ‘true’ understanding of her interior world. When Jeanne stabs her client, there is nothing we can attribute to Jeanne as a *certain* reason for that action and, as such, we are left to decide how we feel about Jeanne without that certainty. The spectator has no recourse to Jeanne’s desires, wishes, or feelings to mediate her horrific action; we cannot examine Jeanne’s reasons in order to judge or mitigate her behaviour.

Akerman’s emphasis on this ambivalent moment becomes very clear in the last seven minutes of *Jeanne Dielman*, when the spectator ‘sits’ with Jeanne. During one long take, Akerman places the spectator in a position in which they sit, face-to-face with

¹³⁶ Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. “What’s beneath her smile? Subjectivity and desire in Germaine Dulac’s *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.” *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, 27-40, p. 33.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

Jeanne, as Jeanne sits at her dining room table in the dark, unmoving. Jeanne is a woman with whom the spectator has become familiar and in whose company the spectator has spent the last three hours, and yet there is no question for the spectator to ask but the one which could possibly receive an answer: how do I, the spectator, feel about this woman? Am I worried for her? Am I repelled by her? If I have been thinking of this character as a person up until this point, as an analogue for a human person like myself, can I continue to think of her that way? (or, is she now no longer human?) Jeanne's recent actions have made evident the presence of her interior world and thus reminded the spectator that Jeanne can feel everything that the spectator can feel; as Jeanne sits at the table, her need for recognition – for acknowledgement of her specificity and value as a unique human being, dependent on us for such acknowledgement as we are dependent on her – weighs on the spectator. Jeanne, sitting at the table, makes, in Butler's phrasing, a demand on the spectator to offer recognition; Jeanne is there to be addressed, just as she addresses the spectator.

The desire to turn away from such a confrontation is clearly evident in some of the critical discussion of the film, in the desire to take this part of the film as fiction, to separate the Jeanne who kills from the Jeanne who cooks and cleans and who could be a real person; Jayne Loader's reaction to *Jeanne Dielman* emblemizes such a desire.¹³⁸ By decrying the fictionality of the film's ending, condemning its violence, and denouncing Jeanne in a number of ways – notably as a monstrous 'castrating mother'¹³⁹ – Loader presents the indignation of a spectator who turns away from Jeanne in the end, denying any relation of affinity between herself and Jeanne.

¹³⁸ "Jeanne Dielman: Death in Installments."

¹³⁹ Ibid., 12.

Conversely, in the fact that Akerman presents the murder of Jeanne's client in the same filmic style as the rest of Jeanne's 'realistic' behaviour, there is the option (which Flitterman-Lewis clearly takes) to consider what it might mean if we take Jeanne at the end of the film as we have taken her up until that point – as representing a person, and, as such, as having a relation of similarity to the spectator's self. To continue to think of Jeanne this way would produce a dissonance between our 'conferring recognition' on this person, as Butler terms accepting the unsubstitutability and value of the person, and our aversion to the action she has just performed. This dissonance is significant to Butler's conception of ethics, in that any ethics must begin from an understanding that one is always-already imbricated in a relation with the other, even if we cannot ask them to explain themselves to us and make them accountable for their actions:

[W]e must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession.¹⁴⁰

The seven minutes at the end of *Jeanne Dielman* constitute such a chance to be moved by the figure of Jeanne, to examine our relationship to a figure whose value we cannot judge, as we cannot demand an account in order to evaluate her reasons, and whose innate value we must either accept, or deny. In this way, Akerman's address of the spectator has direct ethical implications.

¹⁴⁰ Butler, 136.

Anna: Unfathomable Emotions

In *Jeanne Dielman*, the stakes of considering our feelings about Jeanne are very high. The spectator must reckon with the abhorrent fact that, in the world of the film, Jeanne has just killed someone. In *rendez-vous*, however, the connotations of such a consideration of Anna are lighthearted in comparison. As mentioned earlier, Akerman's opaque presentation of Anna begins to change when Anna meets her mother at a train station in the latter half of the film. Here, the spectator's access to Anna's interior world begins to increase, but does not become full, unrestricted access. When Anna sees her mother the first time, the spectator sees Anna in a medium close-up, and Anna's face brightens – she almost smiles. As Anna and her mother embrace, however, Akerman's camera still remains at a distance. The scene which follows, in which Anna and her mother sit in the train station restaurant, constitutes a dramatic departure from Akerman's usual stylistic choices; the scene is filmed in such a way to be reminiscent of a shot-reverse shot pattern. Akerman's camera does move back and forth between shots of the two women, but the cutting does not correspond to showing who is speaking, rather lingering on each woman for long periods as they both speak and listen.

This shot-reverse shot set-up implies something of a breakdown in Akerman's guardianship of the privacy of Anna's interiority through specific strategies of representation: we, as spectator, see what Anna sees for the first time in the film – her mother. Again, though, this does not lend itself to an easy identification with Anna and her minimally indicated pleasure at seeing her mother; any information the shot reverse-

shot structure provides is undercut by the fact that Anna's countenance and dialogue are no more expressive now than earlier in the film, and confuse any clear picture of Anna's feelings. Any idea that Anna has an idyllic relationship with her mother is undone, for example, when her mother mentions missing Anna 'because she has no one to talk to' and Anna replies 'but you never used to talk to me, never.' Finally, Anna and her mother lie next to each other in a hotel room bed that evening, and Anna speaks at length about her affair with an Italian woman. Here, although Anna's description of the event itself is characteristically vague ("I didn't know it could be like that with a woman"), the event of the affair itself, when taken with her description, presents the first instance in which, like Jeanne's action of stabbing her client, the spectator is confronted with the fact that Anna does, indeed, have an interior world which causes her to act. And again, like the presentation of Jeanne, Akerman is able to confirm Anna's interior world without inviting the spectator into that world.

The insistent use of long shots and camera distance which has occurred throughout the film is emphasized upon Anna's following, final meeting. The spectator's inaccessibility to Anna reappears when Daniel, Anna's current, long-term lover, picks her up from the train station. In the scenes that follow, compared to the scene between Anna and her mother, the spectator's visual access to Anna is greatly diminished – we see only the back of her head for the length of their car trip to a hotel, and when the characters reach the hotel, Anna either looks away from the camera out the window or disappears into the washroom. She becomes quiet again as well, listening as Daniel talks at length about his unhappiness with his life. This retreat of Anna into herself is interrupted, however, when Daniel, self-absorbedly musing about the 'beauty of a woman's voice,'

asks Anna to sing to him. Anna protests, claiming she sings off-key, but Daniel replies that she had ‘wanted to be a singer.’ And, so, Anna steps closer to the camera and sings. It is this sequence which is comparable to the scene in which Jeanne sits at her dining room table for seven minutes.

As she sings an Edith Piaf song with a lighthearted melody and tragic lyrics, Anna’s face lights up. As the camera never cuts to a reverse shot of Daniel watching Anna sing, Anna sings to the spectator. As she moves back and forth between a smiling face and a contemplative look, we can suddenly see the expanse of Anna’s interior world and are invited to delight in her happiness, although we have no avenue to understand why she is so happy to sing to Daniel. This invitation, to delight in Anna’s presence, again presents a moment in which we are being asked to consider our feelings towards a character when we have no certain recourse to their reasons and motivations; we cannot evaluate Anna’s worth based on who she desires, or where she wants to live, or whether or not she wants to have children, or for some other reason. Because this moment of consideration arrives without any actions which could encourage the sort of judgment an action like Jeanne’s might, the spectator here can simply come face to face with the pleasure of conferring recognition on Anna, of accepting her singularity and value, in all her opacity and without a demand for her to explain herself. Kinder opportunely notes that “those who stay [for the entirety of the film] learn to recognize [Anna’s] warmth and vitality, which make her more lovable. We see *how* she loves by watching the expressions on her face and the movement of her eyes as she watches her mother, or by the way she sings a song and smiles at Daniel.”¹⁴¹ Margulies echoes this sentiment when

¹⁴¹ Kinder, 42.

she notes that *rendez-vous*'s "emotional and intellectual core lies in Anna's singing."¹⁴²

Anna's singing presents a chance to be moved, to realize that we need not know why Anna is the way she is in order to recognize her irreducible worth.

In an inverse of Anna's singing, Anna leaves a few minutes later to find medicine for the suddenly ill Daniel and, in the cab, begins to cry. Like Anna's happiness at singing, we may guess as to the reason for Anna's tears, but no clear answers are made available to us. The spectator is, again, left to wonder at the interiority of Anna – in Butler's parlance, the spectator is left to continue in a silent dialogue with Anna "where no common ground can be assumed"¹⁴³ and in which we might consider who Anna is without "expect[ing] an answer that will ever satisfy."¹⁴⁴ As Butler continues, "by not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it."¹⁴⁵ In leaving Anna her life, and seeing her as an individual with a life to be recognized, as we would hope for our own lives to warrant such recognition, there is a different sort of identification or allegiance at work here – one which does not demand an account of the other. In this way, we can see the ethical at work in Akerman's treatment of character and her presentation of those characters to her spectator.

Identifying with Anna and Jeanne

¹⁴² Margulies, Ivone. "Echo and Voice in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*," *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, 59-76, p. 71.

¹⁴³ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

Akerman utilizes certain conventions of classical narrative cinema (Margulies writes of Akerman's "[hyperbolic] perspective, linear chronology, ellipsis, and the naturalistic conventions of having single actors perform single characters") in order to present characters that are singular, continuous and coherent. Through *Jeanne Dielman* and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*'s affinities with classical realist cinema, Akerman presents the characters of Jeanne and Anna as 'realistic'. In this way, Anna and Jeanne constitute a representation of human beings, not self-reflexive, Brechtian characters. In contrast to classical narrative cinema, however, Akerman entirely circumvents the processes that usually enable the spectator to rapidly and uncritically gain information about these characters' psychology or identity. In circumventing these processes, she produces characters that are entirely opaque to the spectator. Denying the spectator the kinds of alignment Murray Smith describes, Akerman puts forward the possibility for a specific kind of conscious, prolonged identification very different from the type of identification Smith terms allegiance (a mode of identification in which a spectator utilizes the information they have been given about a character's subjectivity in order to judge how a character fits into the moral universe of a film, and to assess the character's attractiveness or worth based on that judgment).

The type of identification activated through Akerman's strategy of address denies the spectator the possibility of judging the worth of a character against reasons or excuses provided in and by the character's interior world. In the final minutes of *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*, Akerman shows the spectator that, despite the impossibility of coming to know Jeanne or Anna's world of thoughts and feelings, these characters do have such a world. They, like the spectator, have emotions and needs which make them dependent on

those around them. In this presentation of character, the spectator is given the opportunity to identify his or herself with Anna and Jeanne as human beings who fundamentally require recognition as human, and who are dependent on others for that recognition. If one does identify with Anna and Jeanne this way, it is because one feels an ethical imperative to do so. To feel for these characters as fellow human beings, without knowing what they feel, and without asking what they feel, expresses the possibility of an ethical identification: an identification that renounces the demand for an account of oneself. Such an identification between oneself and the other would defer to the fact that we are all in 'one's another's hands,' as Butler says, and would necessarily discard the belief that someone's ability to explain their subjectivity to one's liking, and to place their identity in categories that are easily understood, is what makes them worth feeling for in the first place. That Akerman provides spectators with these possibilities for engaging with characters, and contemplating their interactions with the wider world, aligns Akerman's filmmaking with the ethical project Judith Butler lays out in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Butler's work in turn illuminates *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous* by emphasizing the fundamentally ethical nature of Akerman's presentation of character and Akerman's address, through those characters, to her spectator.

Chapter 2: *Demain on déménage*, *Un divan à New York*, and *La captive*: Akerman's Ethical Hollywood

The understanding of ethics discussed in Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005)¹⁴⁶ provides an enlightening framework for Chantal Akerman's films *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978).¹⁴⁷ Through her presentation of the main characters in these films, Jeanne and Anna, as opaque and unknowable by the spectator, Akerman illustrates the belief that there are limits to what we can know about another person. These characters behave oddly and Akerman gives no information to the spectator explaining why Jeanne and Anna behave as they do. As discussed in the previous chapter, Akerman, confronting the spectator with evidence of the existence of Jeanne and Anna's interior worlds of thoughts and feelings, addresses the spectator in an ethical manner. She presents Anna and Jeanne to the spectator as human beings who cannot be known; Akerman gives the spectator the choice of either confronting and accepting the characters as (a representation of) human beings, singular and invaluable, feeling empathy towards them, or condemning and abandoning the characters. The spectator cannot demand an account from the character, but they can choose to confer recognition on Jeanne and Anna in spite of, and because of, this. In this way, *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous* promote an ethical view similar to that which Butler lays out when she argues that there is an ethical need to recognize the 'limits' of knowability of both oneself and others.

¹⁴⁶ Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

¹⁴⁷ Hereafter referred to as *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous*.

The vernacular conception of ‘ethics’ conceives of the individual as having personal freedom and agency; this agency enables the individual to be held responsible and (thus) punishable for their actions. The notion of responsibility found here entails a questioning of the individual being held accountable for their actions: “Why did you do that?” Being held accountable thus demands that the individual explain their history, their desires and goals, and gives an account of themselves as a justification for their behaviour. In her approach to Ethics, however, Butler troubles the connection between agency and accountability. Butler works from the post-structural view that identity is influenced in ways not available to conscious analysis and, further, that identity is not necessarily a coherent, sustaining, self-identical structure. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler aims to bring together these two concepts of an ethical belief system and the post-structural concept of the ungrounded self. She does this in order to show that an acceptance of the unknowability of human self need not abandon ethics or result in a cynical freedom from responsibility.

Butler, utilizing the work of various twentieth century philosophers,¹⁴⁸ argues that explaining oneself categorically, or ‘giving an account of oneself,’ is impossible. The possibility of fully describing one’s subjectivity is precluded by the fact that one’s own history, including one’s primary relations to others, partially predates one’s consciousness. One’s own history is not, therefore, available to one’s understanding or interpretation. Further, we operate through social norms and systems which are general and, as such, cannot address the specificity of individuals. These norms include the system of language, through which an account of the self can be demanded, and through

¹⁴⁸ Butler addresses the work of, among others, Theodoro Adorno, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean Laplanche. For a more in-depth discussion of these philosophers’ works and how they influence Butler’s work, see the Introduction, pages 1-5.

which an account of the self must be given; Butler writes that such norms are vehicles which I, the individual, “do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity.”¹⁴⁹ Moreover, these norms not only dispossess the individual of their singularity to some extent, they also ensure that some accounts are more acceptable and visible than others.

Butler concludes that because giving a full account of oneself is impossible, giving such an account cannot be taken as the basis for a system of ethics. As a replacement for the demand of such an account, Butler offers another conception of ethics. The basis of this conception is the understanding that we are all inevitably affected by our primary relations with others from the beginning of our lives, and that this relation with the other is a universal and inescapable fact of human existence.¹⁵⁰ Accepting this aspect of human life as a basis for ethical relations would, in Butler’s view, provide a great ethical resource. This is because such acceptance would affirm the need to ‘confer recognition’ on others, or accept their value and singularity, without the demand for them to explain themselves.¹⁵¹ Akerman’s films, in their presentation of character, both show the limits of knowability Butler describes and offer the spectator the ethical opportunity to bestow recognition on an unknowable other. A discussion of how Akerman’s presentation of character constitutes this ethical address will comprise this chapter.

The Ethical in Akerman’s Classical Cinema

¹⁴⁹ *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 39.

¹⁵⁰ This aspect of Butler’s argument is particularly influenced by Levinas and Laplanche. Again, please see the Introduction, pages 3-5, for more information.

¹⁵¹ Butler: “[W]e might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves.” *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 41.

The filmic style of *Jeanne Dielman* and *rendez-vous* contributes to Akerman's ethical mode of character presentation. As Ivone Margulies describes in the aforementioned book, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, the nature of Akerman's filmmaking places her work in a space between the two poles of classical realist cinema and avant-garde cinema. Akerman's films use techniques and conventions from both extremes simultaneously, destabilizing the (perceived) border between them. Margulies names this aspect of Akerman's cinema her 'aesthetic of homogeneity.' This aesthetic downplays ruptures in the film's structure and, by utilizing a "hyperbolic privileging of linearity [and] Renaissance perspective,"¹⁵² instead emphasizes "duration, accumulation, sobriety, and sameness."¹⁵³ This 'aesthetic of homogeneity' to some degree mimics the style of classical Hollywood film. Such a stylistic approach enables Akerman to present characters which, through their similarity to classical cinema's characters, seem 'real;' yet by having her actors employ a minimalist performance style and allotting very little dialogue to her characters (the dialogue Akerman does provide often serves to upset assumptions the spectator may have made about the character's subjectivity), Akerman is able to make her character's interior worlds opaque, unlike the 'transparent' characters of classical Hollywood cinema.

In the films *Un divan à New York* (1996), *La captive* (2000), and *Demain on déménage* (2004),¹⁵⁴ Akerman maintains this aesthetic of homogeneity. However, while this aesthetic, as described by Margulies, references the avant-garde nature of Akerman's

¹⁵² Margulies, Ivone. *Nothing Happens*, 11.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵⁴ Hereafter referred to as *divan*, *La Captive* and *Demain*, respectively.

1970s films,¹⁵⁵ these three more recent films largely exchange the devices common to Akerman's 1970s films (long static shots, a distanced camera, and an overall minimalist approach) for conventions traditionally associated with classical Hollywood cinema. For example, where Akerman's 1970s films display a refusal to move the camera into the space of the fiction, these films regularly follow classical film's shot-order, dictating a movement from an establishing shot to a medium shot to a close-up of a character in a scene. Unlike her 1970s films, these films utilize non-diegetic music, point-of-view shot structures and shot reverse-shot structures – stylistic practices which, in classical cinema, often function to reflect or underline the subjectivity of a character.¹⁵⁶ Here, Akerman's characters speak often, sometimes explicitly describing their state of mind. Finally, the actors in these films, particularly *divan* and *Demain*, employ an expressive, emotive performance style. Because the ethical aspects of Akerman's 1970s films rely on a presentation of character which avoids many of these conventions, Akerman's use of these stylistic aspects would seem to imply an abandonment of her previous ethical concerns in these films. This is not the case.

This chapter will analyze *divan*, *La Captive* and *Demain* in order to outline the way in which Akerman presents her characters in these films, and the ethical effects of that presentation. In *divan*, *La Captive* and *Demain*, Akerman uses different devices to present characters that do not know themselves and, thus, cannot be known by the spectator. These devices include repetition of dialogue among characters, denial of narrative justification for characters' actions (or lack of action), and narrative allusions to

¹⁵⁵ Margulies calls this aesthetic a “decentering mode” which aims to establish a “nuanced antinaturalist cinema.” 56.

¹⁵⁶ For a concise discussion of the conventions of classical cinema, see Stam, Robert. *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, 259. Stam writes that “interior monologue, eyeline matches, [and] empathetic music” function as “devices for implying subjectivity.” 259.

classical Hollywood films such as *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940) and *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). Examining Akerman's use of these devices, this chapter will show that the characters in *divan*, *La Captive* and *Demain* seem, to the spectator, as subject to the whims of social norms, continually at a loss to understand their own behavior and desires. However, as we will explore, in these films Akerman also reminds the spectator that the characters have thoughts and feelings, desires and hopes – though they are not always able to understand those feelings. In *divan*, *La Captive* and *Demain*, Akerman shows the spectator that characters have their own interior worlds in different ways: in *Demain*, Akerman uses prolonged scenes of character's silent contemplation to hint at the characters' thoughts; in *divan* Akerman presents a conception of love in which characters fall in love with the unique and irreplaceable subjective world of the other (even though they do not fully know that world); finally, in *La Captive*, Akerman utilizes a subtle switch in character alignment to illustrate to the spectator that the characters, which may have seemed without feelings, do in fact have desires and hopes, unknowable to the spectator.

Exploring each of these devices and films in detail, this chapter will argue that Akerman's presentation of character in these films constitutes an ethical address. This chapter will illustrate the respective ways *Demain*, *divan* and *La Captive* prompt spectators, in spite of the films' presentation of the characters as unknowable to themselves and others, to think of these characters as human by reminding them that these characters have their own world of feelings and desires, just as the spectators do. (Akerman's employment of conventions of classical illusionistic film here presents characters which, to a greater degree than those of her 197s films, seem 'realistic' to the

spectator; this is opposed to using, for example, Brechtian devices to undercut the realism of the representation. That the spectator has the means to think of characters as though they are actual human beings is a necessary prerequisite for creating a space for ethical reflection.) As will be discussed individually in relation to each film, the ethical nature of *Demain*, *divan* and *La Captive* is found in the opportunity Akerman gives the spectator to feel for the characters in these films. Identifying with these unknowable characters requires an acceptance of both the limits of knowledge about the self and other; such acceptance is, according to Butler, an ethical resource. Akerman prompts the spectator to identify with these characters by emphasizing their specific and unique humanity and their need for recognition from others. In this way, Akerman points to Butler's argument that, because all human beings are dependent on one another for recognition, it is an ethical act to bestow recognition and feeling on another in spite of the impossibility of knowing that other. As Butler writes, "[i]n a real sense, we do not survive without being addressed, which means that the scene of address can and should provide a sustaining condition for ethical deliberation, judgment, and conduct."¹⁵⁷ The ethical nature of these films lies in Akerman's address of the spectator as someone who can feel the value of another without being able to know that other. The individual examinations of *Demain*, *divan*, and *La Captive* that constitute this chapter will further outline Akerman's ethical address, and the specific way it functions in each film.

Demain on déménagement

¹⁵⁷ Butler, 49.

Demain begins with Charlotte (Sylvie Testud), a young writer, moving into a new apartment with her mother Catherine (Aurore Clement) – possibly as a result of the recent passing of Charlotte’s father. The film follows the eccentric lives of the two women: neither woman can sleep; despite the women’s attempt to keep it clean, their apartment is cluttered, dirty, and smoky to an absurd extent; Charlotte is under a deadline to produce an erotic novel, but cannot seem to write anything but comedy. The two women decide to move again, which leads to a series of encounters with other people searching for new real estate. The film ends with Charlotte living with a young mother she meets in this process, finally writing her own novel, having abandoned the erotic novel.

In *Demain*, Akerman presents characters which behave in contradictory ways, rebuffing any clear categorization of their identities and disallowing the spectator the feeling that he or she may ‘know’ a character through such a categorization. Further, Akerman emphasizes the conventional nature of language – and the emotions, feelings, and beliefs language purportedly expresses – in order to portray characters that are influenced by social norms operating externally to them; this portrayal produces characters who cannot fully understand their own behavior.

This chapter will explore how Akerman’s treatment of character functions to exhibit characters whose subjectivities are unknowable both to themselves and the spectator. And yet, as the following sections will argue, Akerman presents the characters in *Demain* as having interior, subjective worlds – though the characters may not know them fully, they still have private thoughts and desires. Akerman creates this presentation of character through her use of silent, still moments (inserted in a film otherwise filled with rapid-fire dialogue and action) and her implication that the characters’ individual

histories, particularly the impact of the Holocaust upon those histories, have shaped their subjective viewpoints. The next sections will illustrate how, in the use of these quiet moments and references to the characters' pasts, Akerman reminds the spectator that these characters are similar to the spectator, in that the characters are 'people' who have feelings and memories. Akerman asks spectators to ally themselves with the characters of Charlotte and Catherine, regardless of the fact that the spectators cannot know exactly how Charlotte and Catherine feel. Akerman's address of the spectator here points to Butler's claim that recognizing the value of the other, even though the other cannot explain themselves, is an ethical act. The next two sections will explore in detail the ethical aspects of *Demain* and examine the specific connections between Akerman's presentation of character here and Judith Butler's discussion of ethics.

Contradictory and Confused Characters

In her article "Critical Categories and the (Il)logic of Identity," Angela Stukator details how Akerman's film *rendez-vous* works to undo the 'logic of identity,' "a logic which dictates that the critic emphasize elements (textual or extra-textual) of coherence, unity and wholeness" in order to support the understanding of identity as a continuous, closed, fixed thing.¹⁵⁸ Akerman's construction of the character of Anna, Stukator argues, disrupts this notion of identity through, among other things, the promotion of "internal differences, contradictions and tensions [in the character of Anna] which could

¹⁵⁸ Stukator. "Critical Categories and the (Il)logic of Identity." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 2 Issue 2/3, (1993): 117-128, p. 118.

potentially blur the boundaries of a category.”¹⁵⁹ The presentation of characters that cannot easily be placed in reductive categories is a common feature of Akerman’s 1970’s filmmaking; this presentation supports the opacity of the characters’ subjectivity in those films, as the spectator cannot apply a stereotypical personality category in order to make assumptions about the character’s interior world. This aspect of Akerman’s character construction is clearly at work in *Demain*, albeit in a different way than in her earlier films.

Akerman’s provision of characters which behave in ways that confound any interpretation or categorization of identity is extremely pronounced in *Demain*. The rapid-fire pace of the film supplies many instances of confused and contradictory characters in different subplots and vignettes: ‘La Femme Enceinte’ (Natacha Régnier) is a young, pregnant newlywed. She speaks perpetually of her desire to be away from her dull, sexually over-active husband and avoid becoming a mother, and yet she docilely follows her husband away whenever he appears. Mrs. Delacre, one half of an unhappily married couple who comes to look at Charlotte’s apartment, describes how she is completely unable to decide if she hates her husband and wants to leave him, or if she loves him and always will. Throughout the film Charlotte and her mother behave in ways which spill over and destabilize any label or category which the spectator may attempt to attach to them – Charlotte is a writer who seems unable to write, and her mother is a piano teacher whose vibrancy and comedically implied sex life troubles the stereotypical classification of her as ‘elderly.’ As Stukator describes in her analysis of *rendez-vous*, Akerman is here emphasizing ‘internal differences, contradictions and tensions’ in her presentation of Catherine and Charlotte. As such, the spectator is unable to glean

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 119.

information about the characters' thoughts and feelings by simplistically categorizing either character.

There is more to Akerman's presentation of opaque characters, however, than the confused and contradictory qualities she attributes to them. To fully address the operation of character in *Demain*, it will be worthwhile to examine Akerman's use of dialogue, in which she, at times, divests the characters' words of meaning and instead emphasizes the materiality and rhythm of the dialogue. Discussing Akerman's use of dialogue in her films, Margulies states that Akerman, "[e]xploring language at the border of its referential power, [...] wants her verbal tracks to end up 'as a bla, bla, bla, as psalmody'."¹⁶⁰ Through repetition of words and phrases, Akerman "transmut[es] content into rhythm."¹⁶¹ This aspect of Akerman's cinema is prominent in *Demain*: characters speak constantly, and yet express very little diegetic information – the majority of the information they express is redundant. This effect, at least partially, results from the repetitive nature of the dialogue in the film; compared to the characters in Akerman's 1970s films, the characters here speak a lot, but they often say the same thing over and over again. They also continuously speak of things which are evidently unrelated to either the situation at hand or which seem inappropriate or excessive to the social boundaries of that situation. Margulies describes this aspect of Akerman's cinema as another avenue through which Akerman divorces dialogue from its "conventional narrative purpose."¹⁶² In *rendez-vous*, for example, "Anna's lack of understanding of the amount of information appropriate in different social contexts is one example of how Akerman introduces excess

¹⁶⁰ Margulies, Ivone. *Nothing Happens*, 193. Margulies is referencing an interview with Akerman: "Rencontre avec Chantal Akerman: *Les Rendez Vous D'Anna*," Interview by Caroline Champetier, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 288 (May 1978), 54.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 160.

content” – content which disrupts the idea of dialogue as directly revelatory.¹⁶³ These elements, as in Akerman’s other films, work to downplay the ‘referential power’ of the dialogue in *Demain*.

The idiosyncratic use of language typical of Akerman’s dialogue is especially pronounced in *Demain*: characters in this film have an uncanny habit of repeating and sharing sentences spoken by other characters. They spout these phrases – which they may or may not have heard from other characters – over and over again until the sentences become both comical and meaningless. The following odd simultaneities in the film provide examples. Whenever a character in *Demain* inspects an apartment for possible rental, they open the fridge and remark, shocked, “It’s empty!”, and another character always responds, friendly, “It can be filled.” Every character in the film seems to know a horrible story about a woman microwaving her cat, and they mention it of their own accord regularly. During their apartment-showing, Charlotte and her mother seem to have memorized the exact same sales speech, and repeat phrases like, “no load-bearing walls, all electric!” ad nauseam. La Femme Enceinte, Charlotte, and Catherine all share the same reaction to chicken made with thyme at various moments throughout the film: they remark on how it reminds them of nature and memories, and they begin to cry.

This odd repetition and sharing of lines of dialogue, and the feelings those lines purportedly describe, reaches its apex in the figure of Charlotte. Charlotte is struggling to finish her erotic novel; following her mother’s suggestion, she spends much of her time listening to other people, in order to gain inspiration from the eroticism ‘all around her.’ She only succeeds in repeatedly stringing together series of wholly unerotic remarks,

¹⁶³ Margulies discusses this aspect of Akerman’s cinema in *Nothing Happens*. She outlines the concept of ‘Talk Blocks’ – dialogues where one character speaks for so long that the dialogue effectively becomes a monologue (154-161).

however, which she copies directly from other people's conversations. This results in writing like (as her mother vacuums in the background) "he leans over the sex of the young woman, who is limply Hoovering. The Hoover stops dead. She screams. The fuses have blown."

Charlotte's parroting of verbal phrases she hears from other characters, and the sharing of phrases and reactions amongst all the characters, evidences a trait of Akerman's cinema which is best described by Steven Shaviro in his article "Clichés of Identity: Chantal Akerman's Musicals."¹⁶⁴ In his analysis of Akerman's film *Golden Eighties* (aka *Window Shopping*, 1986) Shaviro comes to the conclusion that in the way "the characters in *Window Shopping* always seem to be trying on their moods and desires, in the same way they try on clothes and hairstyles," the film,

suggests an equation between three things: first, deadpan postmodern irony; second, the ubiquitous commodification not just of necessities, nor even also just of luxury goods, but of all forms of self-expression; and third, the conventional nature of the signs that indicate and communicate feelings, that is to say, that represent our feelings not only to others, but also (and even perhaps most crucially) to ourselves.¹⁶⁵

Although *Demain* and *Window Shopping* are films with very different aims, Shaviro's description of the ideological underpinnings of the earlier film is particularly useful in uncovering the effects of the character construction in *Demain*.

Discussing *Window Shopping*, Shaviro argues that Akerman presents characters' emotions and affects through stereotypes, thus showing the "everything is a conventional

¹⁶⁴ Shaviro, Steven. "Clichés of Identity: Chantal Akerman's Musicals," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. 24 (2007): 11-17.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

sign.”¹⁶⁶ This argument, for the most part, applies to *Demain* as well. Characters in the film express a gamut of emotions and affects: love, heartbreak, jealousy, oppression/suffocation, pain, grief, joy. Yet these emotions are often expressed so suddenly and inexplicably by the characters that it is difficult for the spectator to treat them as revealing some interior state the character is experiencing. They seem instead, like the phrases every character repeats, to have come to the characters from an external source. Emotions, affects, phrases, and desires which appear on the characters of *Demain* seem to belong to a collective, extrinsic pool; a pool through which each character moves and through which they are moved.

Window Shopping, like much of Akerman’s 80s cinema, is a film (particularly when taken in conjunction with its partner film, *Les Années 80* [1983]) which is very much committed to exploring and revealing the workings of the illusionistic film. *Demain*, however, is a film whose aims are much more in line with those of illusionistic film than not. When placed in this milieu of illusionist cinema, Akerman’s treatment of affect and emotion that Shaviro is discussing does not so much function as a critique within the film of, as Shaviro puts it, the ‘commodification’ of everyday life, but instead constitutes part of the reality of the film. As such, a spectator is confronted with characters who exist in the ‘realistic’ world of a classical Hollywood film but which yet behave and speak in a way which indicates that their words and emotions come to them from an external source.

The externality of the characters’ emotions and words in *Demain* illustrates something: mechanisms like language – which are thought to express our individual, singular, interior world – are in fact not unique to an individual, do not originate from

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 14.

that individual, and, in their conventional nature, actually work to massify the individual. In Butler's conception of subjectivity, this influence of social norms upon the individual is one cause of our limited ability to know ourselves. Butler notes that there are "*norms* that facilitate my telling about myself that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity."¹⁶⁷ Social norms constitute "a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our 'singular' stories are told."¹⁶⁸ Akerman's characters in *Demain* operate in just such a domain of unfreedom and substitutability, speaking words which do not belong to them and expressing feelings which do not always seem to issue from within themselves. Because one must submit to the operation and limits of the norm when one uses it, Butler argues that, "indeed, it seems that the 'I' is subjected to the norm at [that] moment".¹⁶⁹ Charlotte, Catherine, and the other characters in *Demain* embody this understanding of human beings as, at least partially, subject to the operation of external, social norms – norms whose operation are beyond the knowledge of that human being.

Because Akerman presents the characters in *Demain* as subject to the operation of social norms, the characters cannot know fully themselves. The spectator sees that these characters cannot know completely why they feel and behave as they do – Charlotte, for example, does not really seem to understand why the smell of chicken makes her cry, and she certainly does not understand why she cannot write erotic fiction. The characters cannot fully understand the 'why' of their actions because the 'why' does not come entirely from them, but from shared external norms. The proximate, loud, open, expressive characters Akerman's puts forward in *Demain* present a radical departure

¹⁶⁷ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 39 (Italics in original).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

from the distant, quiet, inexpressive characters of her 1970s films. Yet, despite this movement from inexpressivity to expressivity, the spectator does not understand why these characters behave as they do, why they fall in love, what they desire, what they hate. The character's interior worlds are not transparent to the spectator as those worlds are not entirely transparent to the characters themselves. Butler writes "[t]he very terms by which we give an account, by *which* we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character."¹⁷⁰ The social nature of the norms by which these characters would make themselves known precludes real individual expression – Akerman presents language as an impediment to the self-knowledge of the characters in *Demain*. Akerman thus presents *Demain*'s characters as the fictional expression of Butler's claim that one's own subjectivity is not entirely available to one's own understanding and, therefore, cannot be available to others' understanding.

Contemplating Interiority

Of all the characters in *Demain*, Charlotte is the most opaque. Her strange behaviour goes beyond her parroting of phrases spoken by other characters. For example, in her quest to write something erotic Charlotte does, occasionally, overhear something sensual in nature and, yet, can still make no use of it: early in the film she eavesdrops on a conversation between two women in a coffee shop who are talking explicitly about sexual encounters, but Charlotte loses interest and instead copies down the phone conversation of a man who turns out to be talking about real estate. Later, when Charlotte

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 21.

is sharing a studio apartment with another woman, her novel begins to materialize. Both Charlotte and the spectator eventually realize, however, that this is because the other woman is writing the novel for her – Charlotte cannot tell her own writing from someone else's. As moments like this in the film add up, it begins to seem to the spectator of the film that Charlotte has no interior world at all – she cannot take things into herself and interpret them, she can only repeat back to the world what she has heard from it. This aspect of Charlotte's character may seem to imply that Akerman is presenting an understanding of subjectivity in which human beings have no interior world at all, or that our subjectivity is constituted entirely in the actions we perform.

In his aforementioned article, Shaviro notes that *Les Années 80* “proposes a radically constructivist and performative account of subjectivity”¹⁷¹ and that, in *Window Shopping*'s presentation of subjectivity, “there is no correspondence between inner and outer, or between experience and its expression.”¹⁷² *Demain*, however, does not present an account of subjectivity in which the social forces of the world compose or control the entire constitution of a human being, or one in which there is only a surface and no internal desires or drives to contend with those social forces. As Jerry White notes regarding Akerman's films,

[W]hile remaining resolutely subjective, as any good modernist should, Akerman ultimately balances her explorations of interiority with awareness of external pressures shaping interior experience. High modernism almost fetishizes the interior; Akerman does not.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ “Cliches of Identity: Chantal Akerman's Musicals,” 15.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷³ White, Jerry. “Akerman's Revisionist Aesthetic,” 54.

In the three films under discussion in this chapter, Akerman puts forward a view of identity in which humans *do* have an interior world of thoughts and emotions, but that this world is not hers to represent. This view will appear in different forms throughout *divan*, *La Captive* and *Demain*, but in order to describe how Akerman makes clear this view of identity here, we must review the film's references to the Holocaust.

Throughout the film, there are hints that both Catherine and her deceased mother survived internment in a concentration camp. At one point in the film, Charlotte and a friendly real estate agent discuss what it means to be a child of a Holocaust survivor – a discussion which links Charlotte and Akerman herself, as Akerman's mother is a survivor of Auschwitz. The nature of Jewish identity is an over-arching thematic concern of Akerman's films.¹⁷⁴ She has produced films which deal explicitly with the Jewish Diaspora and which address the impact of Jewish traditions and history upon her own life and others'; these films include *rendez-vous*, *Histoires d'Amérique (Food, Family and Philosophy*, 1988), the installation *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's "D'Est,"* (1995), and *Là-bas* (2006). Margulies notes that "Akerman's structured repetitions in narrative films like *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."¹⁷⁵ Margulies' remarks make it clear that Akerman's interest in representations of Jewish identity can be seen in the very structure of many of her films.

¹⁷⁴ For in-depth discussions of Akerman's interest in and approach to Jewish identity, see Bergstrom, Janet. "Invented Memories." In *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*. Ed. Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003, 94 – 116, and Pravadelli, Veronica. *Performance, Rewriting, Identity: Chantal Akerman's Postmodern Cinema*. (2000) Torino: Otto Editore, 2008.

¹⁷⁵ *Nothing Happens*, 194.

Akerman's interest in the ramifications of the Holocaust upon the contemporary world can be seen as ethical in nature. The events of the holocaust have had a definitive impact upon 20th century philosophy, particularly informing understandings of ethics. The horrors of the Holocaust have so fundamentally affected our conception of human beings' capacity for destruction of other human beings that, "therefore, we must speak of post-Holocaust ethics."¹⁷⁶ The philosophers Emmanuel Levinas, Theodor Adorno, and Hannah Arendt have particularly examined the nature of post-Holocaust ethics.¹⁷⁷ Judith Butler's approach to ethics reveals the influence of these philosophers, as her work is also concerned with ethics and the responsibility to the other in the post-Holocaust world. Akerman's cinematic explorations of the echoes of the Holocaust upon day-to-day life connect her work to the larger ethical response to the Holocaust addressed by these philosophers and developed in Butler's discussion of ethics.

To return to the specific ethical nature of *Demain*, this aspect of the film is best expressed in a scene which occurs at the mid-point of the film. Charlotte and her mother sit at the kitchen table late one night. Catherine reads aloud from her own mother's long-lost diary, written while she was interned in a concentration camp. As Catherine reads her own mother's words, "I am a woman. As I am a woman, I cannot say all that I feel, my memories, my secrets, my thoughts, aloud", there is first a close-up of Charlotte and then her mother; neither of their faces clearly express a specific emotion; rather, both imply a

¹⁷⁶ Roth, John K. "Introduction: Ethics after Auschwitz." In *Ethics After the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses*. Eds. Roth, John K. et al. St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1999, vii-xvi, p. xv.

¹⁷⁷ For a discussion of the relation between these philosophers and the Holocaust, see Lang, Berel. "Philosophy's Contribution to Holocaust Studies." In *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust*. Eds. Garrard, Eve and Geoffrey Scarre. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2003, 1-8. For more information on this aspect of Levinas' work particularly, see Grob, Leonard. "Emmanuel Levinas and the Primacy of Ethics in Post-Holocaust Philosophy." In *Ethics After the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses*. Eds. Roth, John K. et al. St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1999, 1-14.

vague sense of sadness and melancholy. Once Catherine has read this line – a line describing the inability to speak of one’s inner life – the camera pulls back, revealing a prolonged medium shot of the two women sitting at the table, smoking and staring. The film’s pace changes here dramatically, moving from rapid dialogue and characters’ perpetual movement to a prolonged quiet, still scene.

In his work *Engaging Characters*, Murray Smith argues that ‘identifying’ with a character – in the sense that a spectator identifies his or herself with the character, empathizing with and feeling for that character – requires the spectator to feel *allegiance* to that character; allegiance requires access to a character’s thoughts and feelings, so the spectator may analyze a character’s moral code.¹⁷⁸ Breaking with this function of identification in classical cinema, as Smith describes it, Akerman here presents the spectator the opportunity to identify with and feel for characters without having access to the characters’ thoughts and feelings. In this scene, Akerman reminds the spectator that Catherine and Charlotte do feel. As these characters stare quietly, we assume that they must be thinking *something*; these characters do have their own thoughts, and loves, and pains, but they are not for us to know. Seeing Catherine’s face after reading her mother’s words and seeing Charlotte gaze at Catherine, the spectator feels the burden of feelings on these two characters, how it has formed them, and how it is too big to speak. Akerman reminds the spectator that these two characters have a history and series of interactions which has made them who they are – they do have an interior world – but it is more than they and we can understand or explain. In other words, if the spectator feels for Catherine

¹⁷⁸ Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 188.

and Charlotte, thinking that they are worth feeling for, the spectator must do so without knowing what these characters feel themselves.

Feeling for a character without being able to ‘know’ that character can be read, using Butler’s conception of ethics, as an ethical act. Feeling for Charlotte and Catherine requires the spectator to think of these characters as human beings and accept them as individuals of unique value, in spite of both the characters’ inability to completely understand themselves and our resulting inability to understand them as well. In Butler’s view, this acceptance is a ‘recognition’ of the other. By providing spectators this prolonged quiet moment in which to think about Catherine and Charlotte’s unknown and unknowable feelings, Akerman gives them the option to bestow recognition on these characters: in this moment, we think that Catherine and Charlotte must have emotions, desires, and thoughts as we know we do ourselves; they think and feel in the same way we think and feel. By identifying ourselves with these characters, we are identifying the similarities between ourselves and the characters. We identify ourselves with characters that cannot know themselves, who are partially subject to the operation of social norms external to themselves, and, as such, consider that we are the same as that character – that perhaps we cannot know ourselves. In Butler’s view, considering oneself this way is an ethical act, with ethical consequences. Butler argues that “an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others”¹⁷⁹ constitutes an ethical resource, a resource which will help us to shed the demand for an account of the other. In *Demain*, Akerman provides the ethical opportunity to recognize an other from whom we cannot demand an account, as they cannot demand that account from themselves; in the process, she gives us a chance to consider the [im]possibility of giving that account ourselves.

¹⁷⁹ Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 63.

Un divan à New York

Of all Akerman's films, *divan* most consistently employs the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. Like *Demain*, Akerman here employs conventions like shot reverse-shots, movement from establishing shots to close-ups, point of view shots and non-diegetic music in order to tell the seemingly clichéd story of two characters who fall in love, and must overcome obstacles in order to end up together. Discussing the film's similarity to classical Hollywood cinema, Amy Taubin calls *divan* "a flat-out commercial endeavor;"¹⁸⁰ Jonathan Romney writes that "Akerman seems to have in mind the sort of brittle, urbane comedy that might once have starred Grant and Hepburn (Katherine) in the 1940s, or even Astaire and Hepburn (Audrey) in the 1950s."¹⁸¹

Utilizing the conventions of classical Hollywood romantic comedies, Akerman constructs *divan*'s dialogue, plot and characters in such a way as to present a specific conception of 'love.' This conception presents characters that are unable to fully know both themselves and others; and yet, the characters in the film care for and love one another seemingly because of this unknowability. The opacity of Akerman's characters, that fact that they are unknowable both to themselves and others, references Judith Butler's arguments about the limited nature of self-knowledge. The following sections bring Butler's work into conjunction with *divan*, particularly Butler's understanding of the 'exposed' human body, in order to show the ethical connotations of Akerman's film.

¹⁸⁰ Taubin, Amy. "Too Late Smart." (1997, February 4). *Village Voice*. 70.

¹⁸¹ Romney, Jonathan. (1996, August 26). "Tepid Souffle of Love and Psychoanalysis Misfires Badly." *The Guardian*. 2.

These connotations stem from Akerman's illustration of a conception of love which accepts the other without the demand to know that other.

At the beginning of *divan*, Dr. Henry Harriston (William Hurt), a psychoanalyst living in New York, places an advertisement for a Parisian apartment swap. Beatrice (Juliette Binoche), a dancer living in Paris, hounded by male suitors, takes up Henry's offer. When Beatrice arrives in Henry's upscale apartment, Henry's patients mistake Beatrice for his replacement and, with no qualms, she begins to treat them. Henry, dismayed by Beatrice's run-down apartment, returns to New York early; he is, however, too charmed by Beatrice to confront her about her usurpation of his practice. He assumes a false identity and sees Beatrice as a patient. They fall in love, though neither is able to profess this to the other. Ultimately, however, the couple overcomes all of the miscommunications and other hitches; they finally meet in Paris and confess their love.

Jerry White's article "Chantal Akerman's Revisionist Aesthetic" provides one of the few academic considerations of *divan*. Commenting on Akerman's predominant use of long takes in the film, White argues that this aspect of the film presents the subversive qualities of Akerman's cinema perhaps more easily observed in Akerman's explicitly avant-garde films:

When we remind ourselves of Bazin's three claims for the effects of long take/depth of focus and recall the slow pace and carefully composed mise-en-scène of Akerman's film...it becomes possible to see how the cinematography in *A Couch in New York* works against closure, stability, and viewer passivity.

Akerman thus retains space for the subjectivity of the spectator even as she co-opts classical Hollywood forms.¹⁸²

White's description of Akerman's ability to both utilize the conventions of classical Hollywood filmmaking and simultaneously disturb those conventions and their effects is also very much applicable to the way in which Akerman structures character in this film.

The two main characters of *divan*, Dr. Henry Harriston and Beatrice Saulnier, likely constitute the closest approximations of classical Hollywood characters to be found in Akerman's films: they speak of having emotions, desires, and goals; the actors perform the characters in such a way as to express those desires and emotions; and the characters (eventually) behave in such a way as to obtain their goals. And yet, Beatrice and Henry also, like Charlotte in *Demain*, seem often mystified by their own behavior. Both characters make careers (real and pretend) out of explaining other people's behavior, and yet Beatrice and Henry often cannot explain their own actions. Like *Demain*, Akerman presents these characters as subject to external forces of generic social norms, forces which Beatrice and Henry cannot always comprehend, and one of the ways Akerman achieves this presentation is, again, through her use of dialogue.

In *divan*, Akerman uses language in a similar manner to *Demain*, having characters share and repeat lines of dialogue, often when discussing other characters. There are various examples of this use of dialogue throughout the film: describing Beatrice, various characters remark "she's unbelievably frank!"; attempting to describe what makes the other special, both Henry and Beatrice can only repeatedly remark that the other is "different"; when trying to find words to confess his love to Beatrice, Henry

¹⁸² White, Jerry. "Chantal Akerman's Revisionist Aesthetic." *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*. Eds., Petrolle, Jean and Virginia Wright Wexman. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2005, 47-68, p. 63-64.

realizes he can only re-produce lines that he has read in Beatrice's love letters from previous suitors. By having the characters repeat a limited number of verbal lines, Akerman emphasizes here the general, non-individual nature of language. She illustrates that, as the systems we use to express ourselves are impersonal, so, to some extent, are we made impersonal. The fact that the characters in *divan* are made impersonal – that they seem un-unique – is something Akerman emphasizes further in her depiction of the characters' relations to one another.

The characters in *divan* often react to one another as though they are indistinguishable from and interchangeable with every other character. A major plot point of the film, for example, hinges on the notion that Henry's patients do not, initially, notice that Beatrice is not Dr. Harriston – they all enter Henry's apartment and begin their appointments, oblivious to any change (when one patient does notice Beatrice, he assumes, without asking, that she must be Harriston's replacement). In Paris, as Henry is addressed by Beatrice's answering machine as Beatrice, he is simultaneously assumed by one of Beatrice's suitors to be a fellow competitor for her affections, and is punched as a result. Through these sorts of contrivances, Akerman constructs characters influenced by impersonal norms; Beatrice and Henry are defined less by their interior desires, feelings, and goals, than by how others see them, and how they are affected by, and express themselves through, norms like language. To understand how this character formation works in ethical terms, it is necessary to address the presentation of the concept of 'love' in *divan*.

Love, Exposed

In *divan*, again similarly to *Demain*, Akerman's stylistic choices do not collude to present characters entirely devoid of an interior world. The idea that Beatrice and Henry have an internal domain of thoughts, emotions, and hopes is manifested in the film in their love for one another. Beatrice and Henry fall in love when they first meet; within a day of their meeting, they are professing their love – Henry to his friend Dennis, and Beatrice absentmindedly blurting out 'I love you' in front of Henry (he does not hear her). Typically, classical Hollywood films treat love as dependent on the specificities of individuals' unique, singular internal worlds; characters are portrayed as loving each other in their knowledge of one another, of who the other is. In this way, the 'romance' or 'romantic comedy' genres celebrate the notion of a knowable interior world – a celebration which takes the form of one character's attraction to the singular, internal world of another. *divan* alters this depiction of love, however. The way in which Akerman puts forward the notion of romantic love here instead references the 'limits of knowability' of a human being, and the positive effects of recognizing the other in their unknowability and opacity.

When Henry and Beatrice first meet, they fall in love without speaking to each other at length: prior to meeting Beatrice, Henry tells his friend Dennis about his plan to confront Beatrice – he will simply walk in, tell Beatrice who he is, and take back his life. When he arrives in Beatrice's office, however, and sees Beatrice sitting with her back turned to him, Henry says nothing. He supplies his fake name, 'John Wire,' and sits on the couch. Beatrice, expecting Henry to begin talking about his life (as all the other clients have done), becomes dismayed when Henry will not begin speaking. The two

characters sit for the entire appointment in almost total silence – Beatrice’s occasional “uh-huh?”s coming to no avail. After the appointment, they face each other in the hall; entranced by one another, they stare at each other longingly, hardly able to make sentences. Henry, evidently having forgotten all about his plan to retrieve his life, insists on coming back the next day to see Beatrice; Beatrice agrees. It is clear to the spectator that, as these characters will announce in the film shortly, Beatrice and Henry have fallen in ‘love.’

Akerman here gives the spectator a representation of love which is not about ‘knowing’ the other. Beatrice and Henry do not ask anything about the other, and they receive no information about what the other thinks, what they feel, what their everyday lives are like. Instead, the concept of love as found in this scene is about the specific, unique *presence* of the other person. Henry and Beatrice are overwhelmed by the presence of the other person. This is not to say they are attracted by the physical appearance of the other. Facing away from each other during the ‘appointment,’ neither character really sees the other’s appearance until they meet in the hallway, and at this point each character already seems enchanted with the other. Akerman’s conception of love in *divan* presents characters enthralled with the singular bodily presence of another character.

Akerman’s focus on her characters’ individual, physical presence again foregrounds the limited nature of self-knowledge. Butler describes the connection between the physical body and circumscribed self-knowledge in *Giving an Account of Oneself*: working from the ideas feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero outlines in her

work *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*,¹⁸³ Butler describes this notion of human beings' specific, unique presence, illustrated by Akerman in *divan*, in the concept of 'exposure.' Butler notes that our individual bodies are perpetually exposed in the public sphere; that human beings are

fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance. *This* exposure that I am constitutes, as it were, my singularity. I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, of my life.¹⁸⁴

Butler explains how this aspect of humanity is part of our fundamental inability to know ourselves: our own exposure in the public sphere is something we cannot witness and cannot know. This exposure is unnarratable and, as such, designates a facet of the ungroundedness, or unknowability, of ourselves.¹⁸⁵ And, although Butler is careful to differentiate this conception of the singularity of exposure from "existential romanticism" or a "claim of authenticity",¹⁸⁶ she further argues that "it still matters that we feel more properly recognized by some people than we do by others"¹⁸⁷; in other words, because individuals can recognize, be open to, and care for other specific individuals, the operation of social norms does not make humans the same. As Butler herself points out, this understanding of exposure limits the extent to which individuals are interchangeable.

¹⁸³ *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Trans. Kottman, Paul A. New York: Routledge, 2000.

¹⁸⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 33.

¹⁸⁵ See 38-39 of *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

¹⁸⁶ Butler notes that this singularity is without content, and therefore to some extent still constitutes a substitutability, "that singularity has no defining content other than the irreducibility of exposure, of being *this* body exposed to a publicity that is variably and alternately intimate and anonymous." 34.

¹⁸⁷ *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 33.

¹⁸⁸ Though norms operate on and through everyone, humans are not substitutable – one cannot be exposed in the place of another.

In *divan*, Akerman presents love as a form of recognition very similar to that which Butler describes. Love here takes the form of Henry and Beatrice's recognition of the unique exposure of the other. By having her characters fall in love as they do (almost silently), Akerman shows that Henry and Beatrice, though they live under the influence of massifying social norms which limit their ability to know themselves, are not interchangeable with other characters. Henry and Beatrice each have a specific unrepeatable presence, which the other recognizes, or loves. Because Akerman fashions love as dependent on the recognition of the exposure of the other, she emphasizes the way in which love requires recognition of something about which the other cannot know: their exposure in the world. Beatrice and Henry love a quality of the other – their specific presence – which is not known, and cannot be known, by that other. Through this presentation of love, as the attraction to the unknowable exposure of the other, Akerman depicts the acceptance of such limits as positive; that accepting the other in their unknowability may result in a (possibly reciprocal) recognition, or love, of the other. A further assessment of Akerman's presentation of 'love' in *divan* will reveal more of the nature of this concept.

Other aspects of *divan* help construct the film's specific conception of 'love.' These aspects concern the film's illustration of the aim to know the other as futile. As mentioned earlier, the film's two main characters make it their job to be able to explain others. Henry is a psychoanalyst, Beatrice thinks she is one, and Henry's patients and Beatrice's friend Anne all seem to be quite knowledgeable about the terms and tropes of

¹⁸⁸ See 32-35 of *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

psychoanalysis. *divan* regularly satirizes these characters' aim to know one another, to be able to explain, to categorize, to predict the other. This is particularly evident in the character of Beatrice. Akerman presents Beatrice as humorous in Beatrice's ardent, unaffected belief that a) she has somehow become a psychoanalyst and b) this enables her to deduce the entirety of someone's identity, largely through an understanding of their relationship to their mother. When Beatrice first 'analyzes' Henry (or 'John Wire') and he says nothing the entire time she concludes, "You're different. Different from my other clients. You're secretive, more closed-up. You must have a traumatism, that goes back further! It is buried in your deepest depths. That's the reason!" That Beatrice makes such an extravagant induction about John Wire's personality solely from his lack of verbosity evidences *divan*'s view toward psychoanalysis: the film shows that the belief that psychoanalysis can explain someone's subjectivity or interior world is absurd, and unhelpful. While Beatrice may not be an 'actual' psychoanalyst, Henry is, and he has not been able to help his patients either; they are in dire straits until they come into contact with charming Beatrice (who cures them seemingly through her presence, without speaking to them or about them). In this manner, Akerman depicts the drive to know another human being, to explain a human being as psychoanalysis claims to, as folly.

The aim of knowing someone in their entirety is undone in another manner in *divan*. This is the film's reference and homage to Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner*. In that film, Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan) loathes her fellow shopkeeper Alfred Kralik (Jimmy Stewart). She is unaware that his is actually the anonymous penpal with whom she is madly in love, and whom she claims to know better than anyone. Kralik is also in love with his penpal, though he realizes early on that she is Novak, and

he proceeds to orchestrate their eventual romance. The narrative of *divan* mirrors much of *The Shop Around the Corner*. In *divan*, information about characters is found in the domestic traces they leave on their apartment rather than in letters, and Beatrice falls in love with the present man rather than the absent man, but otherwise the plots proceed in much the same way. Beatrice comes to believe that she knows Henry Harriston completely, analyzing his apartment, his dog, his fiancée, his patients, even his clothes; she does not loathe him, but rather feels sorry for him. As Beatrice believes she is coming to know Dr. Harriston completely, she is simultaneously falling in love with ‘John Wire.’ Like Klara Novak, Beatrice cannot see that the two men are really one.

The character of Beatrice speaks as though she knows everything about Dr. Harriston, and yet she is unable to realize that she has met and fallen in love with him. This incongruity serves to utterly destabilize any belief that psychoanalysis or any other system can enable one to perfectly know and capture the other. Beatrice’s pronouncements of all of the deductions she has made about Dr. Harriston are mocked by the fact she cannot realize who he ‘really’ is, that she is often giving these pronouncements to Dr. Harriston himself. Beatrice’s guesses about Henry, while often apparently correct, cannot reveal the man himself – they cannot account for the human being in front of Beatrice. Akerman denies any equation of the outer, surface aspects of Henry’s personality, his clothes, apartment, job, with his singular presence and identity. While this references the unnarratability of the exposed body – it is an aspect of Henry that Beatrice cannot describe – Akerman is here again showing the spectator the futility of the aim to fully know the other: Beatrice may be able to learn everything about Henry Harriston’s day-to-day life, but she, quite literally, does not know who he is. Through this

narrative device, Akerman shows that there are limits to what can be known about the other.

Unknowing Love: An Ethical Relation

As the characters in *divan* cannot entirely know the other, Akerman further emphasizes that these characters cannot know themselves. Like Akerman's presentation of language as a social norm which works on the characters, *divan* also presents 'love' as a force which works on and through Henry and Beatrice, contributing to their limited self-knowledge. Akerman's promotion of love as a norm is evident in Beatrice and Henry's behavior. Upon meeting, Henry and Beatrice feel love for each other, but they do not understand those feelings: Henry attempts to tell Beatrice who he really is on a number of occasions, but, for no apparent reason, he cannot speak the words; when Beatrice first meets John Wire, she attempts to ask him not to return (as she could not 'help him'), but she changes her mind; she later tell her friend Anne "I don't know what got into me. Something impelled me, a force. The words came out, I asked him to come back." Akerman gives no narrative or diegetic reasons as to why, for example, Henry cannot reveal his identity, and Beatrice agrees to see Henry again. As such, the spectator must assume that the characters' behavior results from their 'love'; that 'love' is working through the characters in a way not available to their conscious comprehension – that love is, as Beatrice says, 'a force.'

Akerman presents Beatrice and Henry as characters who know they love each other, but who do not know why; in this way, Akerman downplays the idea that love is

related to knowing the other, that we love the other for their specific interior world, their history, and their stories. Akerman's total denial of any mention of sexuality in the film further supports the idea that Beatrice and Henry cannot comprehend the operation of 'love' on and in them: as Frédéric Strauss, in his review for *Cahiers du Cinema*, astutely notes, Akerman's avoidance of sexuality has the effect of making Beatrice and Henry seem like children, playing at or 'trying on' the roles of adulthood¹⁸⁹ – as though Beatrice and Henry are unconsciously 'trying on' (or being themselves tried on by) the preexisting normative role of being in love. Beatrice and Henry's love for one another is not explained by a physical attraction or desire for the other – their love remains an aspect of themselves that they do not understand, as it is a role that does not issue only from them.

In *divan*, Akerman links the idea of romantic love to an encounter with the singular, unique, physical presence of the other. The characters in *divan* fall in love with each other without learning anything of the other, anything of their thoughts, desires, or history. In addition to this, Akerman further underscores the characters' *inability* to fully know either themselves or the other. She does this through a comedic undermining of the psychoanalytic claim to be able to explain a human being's interior world; as well, Akerman illustrates that though one may have extensive knowledge of someone's life, habits, and relationships, one is still not be able to know that person fully – just as Beatrice cannot apprehend that Dr. Harriston is actually John Wire. In these ways, Akerman proposes that 'love,' as a caring relation to the other, is not dependent on having knowledge of that other's subjective viewpoint or their interior collection of feelings and thoughts. 'Love,' as found in *divan*, does not require the other to explain

¹⁸⁹ Strauss, Frédéric. "Comme un poisson sans eau." *Cahiers du cinéma*. Issue 501 (April 1996): 72-73, p. 73.

themselves; rather, as Beatrice and Henry love an aspect of the other that the other cannot know – their exposed presence in the world – this conception of love relies on an acceptance of the other’s limited self-knowledge. Akerman’s advancement of this idea of human relation is, taken in conjunction with Butler’s understanding of ethics, an ethical act. As Akerman puts forward this view of ethical human relations – relations which relinquish the expectation to know the other – she gives the spectator the opportunity to consider the same.

It is necessary finally to distinguish *divan*, and its ethical implications, from the arguments of philosopher Stanley Cavell. In Cavell’s writings on classical Hollywood film, he proposes the existence of a genre of films termed ‘comedies of remarriage.’¹⁹⁰ He claims that the romantic relationships in these films present a model for human relations, a model which promotes acknowledgement of the other. In Cavell’s view, acknowledgement refers to knowledge which an individual already has (usually concerning the existence and nature of the other) but which they repress.¹⁹¹ For example, in *The Shop Around the Corner*, one could argue that Klara Novak has known all along of her attraction to Alfred Kralik but has denied it, masking her attraction in her devotion to her pen-pal. Once Klara acknowledges what she already knew (that she hoped for her pen-pal to be Kralik), their romance and happiness can ensue unhindered. This notion of acknowledgement is not what Akerman is presenting in *divan*. Beatrice and Henry know that they love each other soon after meeting, and they do not repress that knowledge. Rather, they do not exactly understand the influence that love has on their behavior – an influence which often prevents them from expressing their love to the other. This

¹⁹⁰ See Cavell, Stanley. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedies of Remarriage*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1981.

¹⁹¹ For a more in-depth discussion of Cavell’s views, see the Introduction, pages 7-9.

influence, rather than a need to acknowledge the other, stops Henry and Beatrice from expressing their love. *divan* is less concerned with the need to acknowledge knowledge we already have than to express the knowledge that there are limits to what can be known about the self and others.

La captive

La Captive is Akerman's loose adaptation of Marcel Proust's *La Prisonnière*, the fifth volume of Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. In Akerman's film, the characters in Proust's novel, Proust's narrator and the object of his affections, Albertine, become Simon (Stanislaus Merhar) and Ariane (Sylvie Testud), one of many changes Akerman makes in her adaptation. Akerman's modern-day adaptation of Proust's work finds Simon living as a wealthy young man in Paris. Ariane, Simon's lover, lives with him and his grandmother in their large apartment. Simon spends his days following Ariane and her friend Andrée around the city. When Simon is with Ariane, he questions her ceaselessly, desiring to know her completely. Simon's jealousy begins to overwhelm their arrangement as he becomes convinced that Ariane is in love with another woman. He breaks off their relationship, only to change his mind when Ariane refutes his claims. She agrees to accompany him to a hotel by the ocean for a holiday. That night, Ariane decides to swim in the ocean and, in an ambiguous conclusion, dies either by accidental drowning, suicide, or possibly by Simon's hand.

In discussing the ethical nature of *La Captive*, it is useful to reference the concept of 'alignment,' as outlined by Murray Smith in his work *Engaging Characters: Fiction*,

*Emotion, and the Cinema.*¹⁹² In his understanding of spectator-character interaction, Smith argues that there is a level of character engagement which he terms Alignment; in this level a spectator is positioned to see the world of a film ‘through’ a character. This positioning occurs in the use of techniques like point of view shots or voice-over narration. Here, though aligned with a character, the spectator is not necessarily emotionally attached to that character or would claim to have ‘identified’ with them. Smith describes such an emotional attachment as another level of character engagement: allegiance. Allegiance typically requires alignment because, Smith argues, a spectator must have reliable access to a character’s thoughts and feelings (as provided by alignment) in order to ally his or herself with, or feel for, that character. Smith claims that allegiance depends on a moral judgment of the character, for which access to the character’s interior world is necessary. Smith’s astute description of alignment and allegiance, and the fact that the two levels of identification are not one and the same, is applicable to *La Captive*; as will be shown, much of the ethical nature of Akerman’s films rests on Akerman’s particular alignment of spectator and characters.

The next sections look at the way Akerman constructs the characters of Simon and Ariane. In *La Captive*, Akerman presents Ariane as seemingly emotionally blank, and possibly devoid of an interior world of thoughts and feelings. Akerman upends this presentation in the final section of the film, however, showing the spectator that Ariane does have an internal world of desires and hopes (albeit a world about which the spectator knows almost nothing). This section will also address Akerman’s alignment of the spectator with Simon for much of the film; despite this alignment, however, Akerman also employs certain devices to deny the spectator access to Simon’s thoughts and

¹⁹² *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

feelings, maintaining Simon's opacity. In addition, as we will see, Akerman depicts Simon and Ariane as individuals who do not know themselves, who do not understand their own feelings and desires. Through the presentation of these unknowable characters, Akerman alludes to the view that there are limits to what can be known about a human being – a view which Judith Butler describes in *Giving an Account of Oneself* as having ethical valence. She writes, “[i]s there in this affirmation of partial transparency a possibility for acknowledging a relationality that binds me more deeply to language and to you than I previously knew? And is this relationality that conditions and blinds this ‘self’ not, precisely, an indispensable resource for ethics?”¹⁹³ This section argues further that Akerman, in her specific illustration of an ambiguous and terrible event in *La Captive*'s final moments, provides the spectator with the opportunity to bestow the kind of recognition which, Butler argues, may result from accepting the limits of human knowability. The recognition Butler describes entails suspending condemnation and apprehending the value of the unknowable other, and seeing the interdependent relationship between self and other. An examination of the way such recognition is at work in *La Captive* will constitute the final part of this section.

Ariane: An Apparent Automaton

As in Proust's novel *La Prisonnière*, the plot of *La Captive* follows Simon's jealous quest to unravel Ariane and her internal world, to know her completely. Ariane is an enigma to both Simon and the audience: she seems to have no will of her own, always responding to Simon's perpetual queries or demands in a submissive, vaguely evasive

¹⁹³ Butler, 40.

manner; when Simon asks her for her thoughts, she often replies that she has none. Actress Sylvie Testud performs Ariane as though she has no feelings about anything; the character speaks in a monotone which implies nothing but passive compliance. As a result, Ariane seems to the spectator, in the most extreme example of the Akerman's characters addressed thus far, to be a figure without an interior world. In addition to Ariane's outright denials of having any desires or thoughts, another of Akerman's techniques for bracketing or downplaying the interiority of her characters is at work here again – that of repetition of language. Ariane repeats words and phrases, notably “au contraire” and “If you like,” to such an extent that she seems to be something of an automaton.¹⁹⁴ In an impression equivalent to that of *Demain* and *divan*, it seems as if these responses have been programmed into, or somehow externally exerted upon, Ariane. Her repetitive responses appear to the spectator to have little, if any, relation to her (possible) internal world.

Akerman additionally underscores the spectator's lack of access to Ariane's interior world in one of her major departures from Proust's *La Prisonnière* – her choice to eschew period representation and set the film in the year 2000. In the novel, Albertine's dependence on Simon is clearly financially motivated; by setting the film in modern-day Paris, Akerman effectively removes Ariane's characters' major motivation for living with Simon. There is no mention in the film of Ariane's financial situation. The

¹⁹⁴ Ariane's apparent automatism provides a connection to Akerman's 1970s films discussed in the previous chapter. As part of her discussion of Akerman's 'aesthetic of homogeneity' in *Nothing Happens*, Margulies discusses the nature of Akerman's characters in term of filmmaker Robert Bresson's cinematic style and use of 'models,' or non-professional actors. Margulies notes, "In this [...] 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." Margulies goes on to say that, in Akerman's 'corporeal cinema,' "this quality is transferred onto characters and performers, and accounts for an awkwardness of rhythm (of movement and speech) that is distinctly other." (64) The further connections between Ariane and characters like Jeanne Dielman are discussed in the last section of this chapter.

spectator is given no explanation initially as to why Ariane chooses to live with a man who jealously attempts to control her. Without any reference to financial motivation,¹⁹⁵ with what amounts to an absence of expression of affection or any other emotion toward Simon, and with Ariane's almost complete lack of self-driven or self-motivated action, Ariane seems in the early parts of *La Captive* very much like the characters of Akerman's 1970's cinema: she is odd, impenetrable, and possessing a private, possibly non-existent, internal world. In the first half of the film, it seems that the spectator is in the same position as Simon, fascinated by Ariane and following her in an attempt to understand her. There are exceptions to this description of Ariane's character, however, which occur in the final third of the film. In order to address the implications of Akerman's construction of Ariane's character (and the further connections between Ariane and the characters from Akerman's 1970s films) it is necessary to first examine the character of Simon.

Simon: Incomplete Alignment

Under the rubric of Murray Smith's model of character engagement, it is clear that, for the first two acts of *La Captive*, the spectator is 'aligned' with the character of Simon. The spectator is temporally and spatially connected with Simon, gaining information about the world of the film through his presence in that world. This alignment between Simon and the spectator would appear to support the critical claim

¹⁹⁵ Akerman's removal of this reasoning for Ariane's choice to live with Simon provided, interestingly, a point of complaint for those critics upset by the opaque nature of Akerman's film. See Ginette Vincendeau's review for *Sight and Sound* particularly: Vincendeau, Ginette. "The Captive." *Sight and Sound*. 11:5 (May 2001): 45-46.

that the world of *La Captive* is actually a visual and aural representation of Simon's subjective viewpoint; that the spectator, in effect, is seeing everything through Simon's eyes. In their article, "Filming Jealousy: Chantal Akerman's *La captive* (2000)," Martine Beugnet and Marion Schmid discuss this view, examining the film as a representation of Simon's idiosyncratic viewpoint in great detail. They argue that it is particularly the film's temporal structure which enables Akerman to detail the "workings of an obsessive mind,"¹⁹⁶ and further, that "the mise-en-scène and pace are less a means to locate characters and events than representations of an internal mental landscape."¹⁹⁷ The critical understanding of *La Captive* which Beugnet and Schmid are espousing then holds that Akerman is displaying Simon's interior world for the spectator, that she is visualizing his subjective viewpoint.

The notion that *La Captive* is constructed to depict Simon's 'internal mental landscape' can be glimpsed initially in the relative absence of people in the film's Paris: as Simon tails Ariane through the streets of Paris or follows her through a museum, there are almost no other human figures to be seen (a fact which lends the film an eerie, unreal quality). Related to this first observation, the second aspect of the film's seemingly subjective nature is that, specifically, the film is almost entirely devoid of men, excepting Simon. Simon has a chauffeur, who may be male, but the chauffeur is never seen onscreen. There are brief glimpses of male housepainters in Simon's apartment, and a male hotel employee in the final scenes, but otherwise the film is populated entirely by females – a disproportionate number of which appear to be friends of Ariane. This aspect of *La Captive*, of course, can be read as Simon's fear that Ariane is a lesbian, and her true

¹⁹⁶ Beugnet/Schmid, "Filming Jealousy: Chantal Akerman's *La Captive* (2000)," *Studies in French Cinema*. Vol 2 Issue 3 (2002): 157-164, p. 160.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 160.

desire is to be only with women; he perceives the world around him as full of threats to his primacy in Ariane's life. Through her use of all of these various devices, then, it would appear that Akerman is showing the spectator Simon's singular view on the world. The spectator's alignment with Simon also functions as part of *La Captive*'s homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; both films depict the male lead's point of view as they obsessively follow women around a cosmopolitan city. *La Captive*'s relation to *Vertigo* will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

If it is true that *La Captive* presents Simon's subjective viewpoint, however, it would seem to present a great departure from the nature of Akerman's character presentation discussed thus far; if Akerman is presenting Simon's interior view on the world, his 'mental landscape,' for the spectator to see, this would appear to contradict the claim that Akerman refuses to represent the interior world, the desires and motivations of her characters. However, despite the aspects of the film described above, it becomes clear upon closer inspection that Akerman is in fact troubling the spectator's access to Simon, and his feelings and thoughts. The spectator's alignment with Simon is not total. As we will see, Akerman radically departs from the style of Proust's novel; whereas Proust describes his narrator's thoughts, feelings, memories, and other mental actions in incredible detail, certainly implying the belief that the subjective world of a human being *can* be understood and captured, Akerman actually repudiates this sort of access to Simon, in spite of the film's alignment to him. Similarly to both *divan* and *Demain*, it will become clear that Akerman's denial of access to both Simon and Ariane's interior worlds expresses the idea that there are limits to what can be known about ourselves and others.

Akerman denies the spectator access to Simon's interior world of thoughts and feelings in different ways. The first is her presentation of Simon as inexpressive, almost as inexpressive as Ariane. Simon's desire to 'know' Ariane completely is clear from the opening scene of the film, but beyond that desire, the spectator learns very little about Simon and his feelings. There is never any explanation of why it is Ariane that Simon wants, for example; Simon himself remarks that he might have been better off if he had chosen to love Ariane's friend Andrée instead. Simon's behaviour is also generally confounding: his refusals to join Ariane on outings, only to follow her from a distance instead, are a particular indication of this. This strangeness reaches its apex in Simon's sexual behaviour. He only desires Ariane when she is asleep, and his love-making amounts to a frottage in which Ariane participates not at all. The most unsettling example of Simon's contradictory and confusing behaviour arrives in a moment late in the film. Simon tells Ariane "as you know, I have no memory" and, of course, in the context of the film, this remark can seem only untrue; Simon obviously spends much of his time cataloguing and bringing up Ariane's past comments and actions. Simon's unusual behaviour and remarks make it difficult for the spectator to categorize Simon and to use that categorization to 'fill in' information regarding Simon's motivations or desires. The spectator of *La Captive* is left with very little, if any, idea as to why Simon does the things he does and what exactly he expects to gain from them.

Another avenue through which Akerman prevents access to Simon's inner world is that of a subtle destabilization of Simon's claims. Over the course of the film, Simon often makes remarks to Ariane designed to contradict her, to prove that she is lying to him. In an early scene in the film the spectator watches Simon investigate Ariane's claim

that she had dinner with her aunt at a certain restaurant (which would appear to Simon and the spectator to be untrue); he later questions Ariane concerning her claim. As the film progresses, Simon continues to make such questioning, insinuating remarks to Ariane; Akerman, however, no longer presents the scenes which might support Simon's claims. At the midpoint of the film Simon drags Ariane away from an opera reception and into his car. He interrogates her about her feelings for Leá (Aurore Clément), an opera singer. The scene, executed in a single take, is excruciatingly long, only broken up when Simon and Ariane exit the car for a brief walk; yet Akerman explicitly leaves out the scene that Simon is presumably referring to when he tells Ariane that he does not want her to have to lie, as "you just told me you loathe that." This scene is the first indication that the spectator is not aligned with Simon fully.

Akerman's refusal to present the scenes which support Simon's claims becomes most conspicuous in the latter half of the film, when he has become convinced that Ariane is a lesbian. Simon visits two women, Sarah and Isabelle; they are presumably old friends of Ariane's who are now romantically involved. Simon questions them about Ariane's desires. When he returns to a sleeping Ariane, however, he mentions seeing not only Sarah and Isabelle, but also Leá; he reiterates this to Ariane later, as they drive to her Aunt's house, claiming that Ariane forced him to go and see Leá. That Akerman does not show us these scenes separates us from Simon: perhaps he is recounting these exchanges accurately, but perhaps not. If he is recounting these things truthfully, and not inventing them, the spectator's alignment with Simon is undermined regardless: he sees and hears things we do not. He goes places we cannot follow. The structure of the film may resemble the mind of a jealous human, Akerman may show us much of what Simon

sees, but that does not mean that we ‘know’ Simon. There are parts of Simon the spectator cannot see – Simon is still opaque. The opaque nature of both Ariane and Simon is oft commented on in negative reviews of the film: Ginette Vincendeau writes that Akerman “[reduces] the characters to ciphers”¹⁹⁸ and Peter Bradshaw states that “the emotional lives of Simon and Ariane are a mystery.”¹⁹⁹ Such reactions to the film indicate that, despite the spectator’s seeming alignment with Simon, Akerman does not provide access to Simon’s interior world of thoughts and feelings.

Vertigo: A Change of Alignment

Akerman deftly employs yet another device to deny the spectator access to Simon’s internal world. This is a device which many critics have commented on, though none have followed the implications of Akerman’s choice through to their full conclusion.²⁰⁰ This device is that of the film’s reference to *Vertigo*. The most obvious parallels between *Vertigo* and *La Captive* surface in the films’ shared narratives of a man, intent on uncovering a woman’s identity, following that woman around a city; both films are marked by long takes, shot from the man’s point of view, as he trails his quarry. But there is another important link between *Vertigo* and *La Captive* to be found in the films’ shifting point of view. Outlining the shifting alignment that occurs in *Vertigo* will provide

¹⁹⁸ Vincendeau, Ginette. “The Captive.” *Sight and Sound*. 11:5 (May 2001): 45-46, p. 46.

¹⁹⁹ Bradshaw, Peter. (2001, April 27). “Enter Brad Pitt, Riding Donkey.” *The Guardian*. 15-16, p. 16.

²⁰⁰ Though she does not discuss it in terms of *La Captive*’s reference to *Vertigo*, Margulies does provide one of the only critical discussions of Ariane’s ‘resistance’ to Simon at the end of *La Captive* in “La Chambre Akerman: The Captive as Creator.” *Rouge* 10 (2007).

<<http://www.rouge.com.au/10/akerman.html>> (accessed 11 Jan 2008).

useful material with which to address Akerman's ethical presentation of character in *La Captive*.

In *Vertigo*, for almost the entirety of the film the spectator is attached spatially and temporally to the character of Scottie (Jimmy Stewart). When Scottie is offscreen, the camera is aligned with Scottie's physical point of view, and when onscreen the camera follows his movements as he follows Madeleine (Kim Novak). Through this alignment with the character of Scottie, the spectator is drawn into Scottie's quest to discover who Madeleine is, to uncover the mystery of her identity. In Smith's terminology, it could be argued that the spectator is 'allied' with Scottie; that he or she approves of Scottie morally and identifies emotionally with Scottie and his quest (as such allegiance may result from alignment).

There is an important exception to this description of *Vertigo's* alignment of the spectator with Scottie's point of view, however: in the second half of the film, Scottie finds Judy (also Novak) and convinces her to accompany him to dinner. Scottie leaves and, for the first time in the film, the camera remains behind with Judy. The spectator is suddenly given unprecedented access to Judy's internal world: she writes a letter to Scottie explaining the ruse and that she was never really Madeleine (a letter which she destroys). The film remains aligned, and possibly allied, with Judy for the next few scenes, revealing her unhappiness at Scottie's attempts to recreate her as Madeleine. When Judy does 'become' Madeleine again, and Scottie solves the mystery, the film returns to Scottie's point of view. Madeleine/Judy again becomes the distant and opaque figure of the first half of the film. The spectator remains aligned with Scottie until the end of the film; although, of course, this final alignment with Scottie cannot be as distinct as

it was originally – the spectator is now somewhere between the characters, allied easily with neither.

In terms of the film's structure, *La Captive* operates in a strikingly similar manner to *Vertigo*. Following Simon's actions in and his viewpoint on the film's world, the spectator is singularly aligned with Simon until the final third of the film. At this point, Simon, convinced that Ariane is a lesbian, tells Ariane one morning that they must end their relationship and that she will be happier as a result. The scene, which takes place in Ariane's bed, marks the beginning of the film's subtle shift to Ariane's viewpoint. For the first time in the film, Akerman repeatedly shows Ariane in close-up. These close-ups, while not giving immediate or substantial access to Ariane's interior emotions by showing her facial expression (in this scene, the actress, Sylvie Testud, retains the largely impassive performance style that she has used until this point in the film), minimally indicate that Ariane is not pleased with this turn of events. Further, these close-ups place Ariane, for the first time, on equal visual footing with Simon; he is the only figure who has appeared in the film thus far in close-up. Furthermore, Ariane, departing markedly from her earlier pliant self, contradicts Simon in giving her own opinion: when Simon proclaims that he and Ariane now sense they will be unhappy, Ariane retorts, "Don't say 'we.' It's you alone who thinks that."

That Akerman has now aligned the spectator with Ariane becomes clearer as the next few scenes, in which Simon drives Ariane to her aunt's home, progress. As the two characters drive in Simon's convertible, Akerman continues to present Ariane in close-up; now, however, these close-ups are no longer part of a shot-reverse shot structure taken from Simon's point of view (in the earlier sequence, the close-ups are diegetically

justified by the cramped space of Ariane's bed) but are simply an indication of the film's shift in focus to Ariane. These close-ups enable the spectator to witness Ariane's frustration as Simon pesters her with questions about her love for him. Again, in a novel moment, Ariane speaks at length in response, indicating her view that Simon's form of love is a destructive, negative thing:

You want to know all, as if that changed something. Me, I ask you nothing.

Neither what you think, nor dream. And if you told me all I feel I'd love you less.

I love you because there's a part of you I don't know. I imagine you've this world that I cannot enter. It intrigues me.

Ariane's speech makes a clear reference to the ethical views found in Akerman's films; here, Ariane explicitly states that love lies in the acceptance of the limits of what can be known about others; earlier in the scene, she also claims that Simon's demand for her to perpetually explain herself simply cannot be fulfilled, forcing her to lie to Simon on occasion. As well, in Ariane's speech, as further evidence of the existence of Ariane's internal world of desires and beliefs, Akerman orchestrates Ariane's movement to the fore-front of the spectator's attention; Ariane's view on the world is the one to which we are now drawn, and Simon's wants and needs recede to the background.

When Ariane and Simon arrive at the Aunt's house, Simon nonchalantly changes his mind about their parting. Instead, he asks Ariane to accompany him on a holiday by the ocean, to which she agrees. The film's attention is still on Ariane in this scene: the spectator can see that Ariane is upset and annoyed by Simon's questions and discussion of future plans, though the spectator is not given any clear explanation as to why Ariane is upset. Her agitation increases once the couple is in their hotel room, and she once again

replies to Simon's inquiries only with 'If you like.' Akerman has again put the spectator in the dark about Ariane's feelings. There are no more close-ups of Ariane, and she explains nothing of her emotional state. The moment she agrees to stay with Simon, the spectator's access to Ariane's emotions and beliefs disappears; like Judy re-becoming Madeleine, Ariane is inscrutable again. We have no answer to the pressing question, if being with Simon is now making Ariane unhappy, why did she agree to stay?

Accordingly, Akerman's camera returns to Simon: Ariane tells Simon she wants to swim before they eat and exits into the dark night; the film remains with Simon as Ariane leaves, following his movements around the hotel room. While this shift presumably indicates a resumption of the film's earlier structure, that is not entirely the case. As in *Vertigo*, the spectator is now aligned with neither character, distanced from both. *La Captive's* movement away from Simon in its final third disrupts the conclusion that this film is a straightforward representation of Simon's interior world. The spectator's access to Simon's 'mental landscape' is not nearly as unfettered as the first half of the film may tempt us to believe.

Without Condemnation: an Ethical Address

As in *divan* and *Demain*, questions of the spectator's access to a character's interior world here have ethical implications. In *La Captive*, these implications surface in the conclusion of the film. Simon, on his balcony, presumably watching Ariane swim, yells out her name. The film cuts to Simon running into the dark sea. He catches up to a thrashing Ariane, who yells out, but what exactly is happening in the water is unclear to

the spectator. In the next shot, it is morning and a small boat in the distance slowly moves towards the camera. Eventually it becomes plain that the boat contains only a shocked-looking Simon, and Ariane is nowhere to be found. The spectator is left with only questions about what may have happened and why: did Ariane kill herself? Was she somehow driven to it by Simon? How could it have been an accident when Ariane was such an accomplished swimmer? Etc. It is here where *La Captive*'s relation to Akerman's 1970s cinema, particularly *Jeanne Dielman*, is especially clear.

Like the stabbing in *Jeanne Dielman*, a violent death occurs in *La Captive*. In both films, the spectator sits in a position which, under different circumstances, could enable judgment of those characters involved in the violence. However, because Akerman has so thoroughly refuted any access to the interiorities of the characters in both films (while also confirming that these characters *do* have internal desires and beliefs which drive them), judgment is impossible. In *La Captive*, we do not know why Simon or Ariane have done what they (may have) done, and without any explanations or justifications, we are not in a position to determine if their internal reasons ameliorate their actions. In the moment Simon, floating in the boat, slowly approaches the screen, Akerman gives the spectator the opportunity to *recognize* Simon and the absent Ariane rather than judge them.²⁰¹ *La Captive* asks the spectator, can you accept the specificity and humanity of the (representations of) human beings here and lost – can you feel for them – without knowing what they feel? Without knowing if, perhaps, Simon was relieved when Ariane died, or if Ariane ended her life out of love for Simon? In

²⁰¹ While *La Captive* is of course less forceful than *Jeanne Dielman* in its encouragement of the spectator's recognition of Jeanne (that film provides seven minutes to stare at Jeanne and ponder these questions), it is also an easier prospect to contemplate recognition of the characters in *La Captive*, as the spectator has not been confronted with actual images of them performing violence to themselves or others.

addressing the spectator in this way – in asking spectators to feel for, or ally themselves with, a character while accepting their limited ability to know that character – Akerman is referencing the ethical need to recognize the other as a being of limited self-knowledge, a need described by Butler. As Butler astutely notes, “recognition sometimes obligates us to suspend judgment in order to apprehend the other.”²⁰² Analyzing another aspect of the final section of *La Captive* will further explain the ethical function of Akerman’s address.

Akerman disallows the spectator any knowledge of Simon or Ariane’s internal reasons as to the things they have done, but there is another aspect of the possibility of recognition which Akerman puts forward. Akerman makes it clear to the spectator that Ariane and Simon may not know themselves why they have done what they have done. Simon does not understand his all-consuming drive to know Ariane (exemplified in his hint to Andrée that his choice of Ariane as love-object was arbitrary), and, for the majority of the film, Ariane is pliant and seemingly devoid of motivations or desires. That Akerman constructs these characters in this manner certainly presents the notion to the spectator that these characters cannot and do not understand exactly what causes them to do the things they do. Because Simon and Ariane appear so genuinely mystified by their own desires – take, for example, Simon’s desire to be with Ariane despite the pain it causes him and vice versa – and the fact that their actions directly cause Ariane’s death, it is difficult to condemn them. The possibility of judgment and condemnation rely on the belief that, upon understanding someone’s reasons for behaving a certain way, one can declare some reasons adequate and others inadequate – that some accounts can be deemed understandable and humane and others unintelligible and inhuman, monstrous. By

²⁰² *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 44.

making clear that these characters are not able to give such an account, Akerman troubles the possibility of condemnation, of separating these figures from oneself.

Akerman's denial of the possibility of condemning the characters of Simon and Ariane evidences another ethical facet of *La Captive*: the promotion of the need to acknowledge the shared qualities of human nature; that, as the other is unknowable, so is the self. Judith Butler describes this need in terms of condemnation and judgment:

Condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn. In this sense, condemnation can work against self-knowledge, inasmuch as it moralizes a self by disavowing commonality with the judged. Although self-knowledge is surely limited, that is not a reason to turn against it as a project. Condemnation tends to do precisely this, to purge and externalize one's own opacity.²⁰³ 46

The realization that Butler outlines here – of the need to accept the other as limitly knowable rather than turn away from them – is what Akerman is offering in the final moments of *La Captive*, and what accounts for the truly haunting sensation of those last moments. In the spectator's alignment with Simon, Ariane, and then neither or both, there are surely, for the spectator, moments of familiarity in the realization of Simon and Ariane's self-opacity. There may be a recognition of the feeling that one's own reasons for behaviour are perhaps not always clear. Akerman's obfuscation of the final events of *La Captive* – and the spectator's resulting difficulty in castigating either character – disallows the spectator any possibility of purging this suspicion that they are themselves opaque, that this familiar opacity is something they can externalize and condemn in

²⁰³ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 46.

Simon or Ariane.²⁰⁴ There is another aspect of Butler's ethical view which Akerman manifests here in her address of the spectator: that a moment of recognition of another is possibly a painful affair.²⁰⁵ The acceptance of an other as a valuable being, and yet limited, not entirely knowable, necessitates an undoing of the self – thinking of the limited other as valuable, in the manner one desires to be thought of, entails an understanding of the similarity between self and other, and, thus, a realization of the limits of the self. But it is this realization which contains the possibility of a new ethical understanding of human nature, of self and other. Akerman presents this realization and ethical possibility in both her characters and the ways she addresses the spectator through those characters. In *La Captive*, Akerman address us, the spectators, as individuals capable of bestowing recognition on others and, possibly, ourselves.

²⁰⁴ Clearly, not every spectator of *La Captive* takes the opportunity for recognition that Akerman presents here. The desire to turn away from the film and declare *La Captive's* characters unrealistic (or un-human) because of the inaccessibility of their interior/emotional worlds is evident in the reactions of the film's detractors. See Vincendeau, Ginette. "The Captive." *Sight and Sound*. 11:5 (May 2001): 45-46; Bradshaw, Peter. (2001, April 27). "Enter Brad Pitt, Riding Donkey." *The Guardian*. 15-16; Andrews, Nigel. (2001, April 26). "Where Tom and Jerry Meets Proust." *Financial Times*. (no pagination).

²⁰⁵ See p. 136 of *Giving an Account of Oneself* particularly.

Conclusion: Akerman and Ethical Cinema

In *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (2010), Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton provide an overview of the current state of film criticism and its relation to current philosophical considerations of ethics and ‘the ethical.’ Downing and Saxton argue that recently, the influence of continental, poststructuralist thought has produced a ‘turn to ethics’ in the Humanities. This influence finds its roots in the work of “ethical philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, the later work of Jacques Derrida (itself borrowing from Levinas’ theory), and the ethical dimensions of Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminist thought, postcolonial studies and queer theory.”²⁰⁶ Downing and Saxton’s book works to explore the ways these philosophers and schools of thought have affected film theory and, though each critical avenue differs greatly in its understanding of ethics, to propose some productive arguments about how notions of ‘the ethical,’ competing and contradictory though they may be, may shed critical light on different theoretical understandings of film.

Downing and Saxton point out that the understanding of ethics found in poststructuralist theory differs greatly from questions of morality or moral codes. A moral code or guideline requires the subject to ask questions of itself like “what ought I to do in a given situation?” The belief in such questioning construes the subject as a unified self, an “ethically capable ego.”²⁰⁷ It is this notion of the self – that the self is a unified agent – which continental theory denies. As such, the theories of ethics that Downing and Saxton address move away from moral concerns: “Ethics in its continental

²⁰⁶ Downing, Lisa and Libby Saxton. *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010, 1.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

sense and in its application for a critical engagement with cultural products can perhaps be most profitably be seen as a process of questioning rather than as a positivistic exercise of morality.”²⁰⁸ The ‘process of questioning’ Saxton and Downing mention here refers to considerations of the interaction between human beings and the centrality of those interactions to the ethical. Further, they write that “[ethics] designates a way of responding to the encounter between self and other/s, while suspending the meaning of the subject-object relation, with its implicit dynamic of dominance and subordination.”²⁰⁹ Though different theorists or critical schools approach the encounter between self and other differently, it is an over-arching concern of *Film and Ethics* to point out the importance of this encounter to current conceptions of ethics.

In light of this understanding of the ethical – that a consideration of the interaction between self and other is a defining aspect of any notion of ethics – Saxton and Downing work to reveal the ways in which ethics is relevant to film criticism. They argue that, like other critical fields in the humanities, film criticism has been influenced by the ‘ethical turn’ of poststructuralist theory; however, in film studies, “this concern with ethics has generally remained implicit.” Downing and Saxton point out, for example, that the theoretical concern with ‘the look’ – found in feminist, postcolonial and queer approaches to film – is essentially ethical, as it addresses the nature of the subject-object encounter.²¹⁰ Over the course of *Film and Ethics*, Saxton and Downing consider a number of different films, ranging between documentary and fiction films and classical Hollywood and avant-garde films, in order to explicitly address the different ways in which ‘the ethical’ may illuminate both those films and established film theories. Overall,

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 3.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 3.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

they argue for the necessity of including considerations of ethics in discussions of film-viewing and filmmaking, as the ethical is already present in those acts:

Rather than devising a system of values in which films can be classified as ‘ethical’ or ‘unethical’, we contend that the ethical is the *context* in which all filmmaking takes place, since the creation and reception of a work of art always already engage desire and responsibility (for both artist and audience). Whenever we negotiate between desire and responsibility, we place ourselves in the arena of ethics.²¹¹

This understanding of film, in which both the filmmaker and film spectator are inevitably drawn into the ethical through their desire for, and responsibility toward, the other, provides a useful backdrop for my own discussion of Akerman’s work. I have argued in this thesis that Akerman’s films present an ethical spectatorial address. As a final illustration of this argument, and as a way to examine the ethical nature of Akerman’s self-presentation in her films, the following section will analyze Akerman’s recent film *Là-bas* (2006) in relation to the larger arguments I have been making concerning Akerman’s films.

Là-bas: Akerman as Character

Chantal Akerman’s career spans thirty-five years of filmmaking practice. This practice has encompassed many different film styles and focuses, including structuralist avant-garde cinema, classical Hollywood cinema and experimental documentaries. The diversity of Akerman’s work is difficult to categorize or summarize. Throughout this

²¹¹ Ibid., 11.

thesis I have tried to delineate an overarching quality of Akerman's films, which I identify as Akerman's distinctive approach to characters and human beings. On the one hand, the characters in Akerman's films are similar to those found in classical realist cinema, in that they maintain diegetic recognizability as representations of 'real' people. On the other hand, they depart from the classical rules of character presentation in that they are psychologically or emotionally unreadable. Akerman not only denies the spectator information about characters' motivations, goals, emotions or desires, but also troubles the spectator's ability to formulate his or her own conjectures about them. Akerman's films, in effect, present characters that are 'unknowable.' As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this thesis, Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) presents an enlightening framework through which to assess the ethical nature of Akerman's character treatment.

In her book, Butler turns to the question of ethics, bringing post-structural understandings of identity into conjunction with questions of responsibility. Butler proposes an ethics heavily influenced by Emmanuel Levinas' idea that the self has inescapable responsibility toward the other. Butler's ethical formation places great emphasis on the unknowability of the self and of the other, arguing that the demand for others to explain themselves cannot be met, and is thus unethical. In Butler's view, an ethical approach to the other accepts the other as unknowable, and aims to recognize the other as invaluable in its singularity and irreplaceability. Recognition here constitutes the moment when we understand our need for the other and the value of a specific individual, in spite of our inability to fully know the other. In Butler's parlance, these moments in

which one may bestow recognition on the other constitute ‘moments of unknowingness,’ and it is in these moments that the ethical exists.²¹²

Akerman’s films work to bring the spectator to these ‘moments of unknowingness’ Butler posits. Her films place the spectator in a position to contemplate individual characters at length and either to ultimately recognize them, becoming undone themselves somewhat in accepting the character’s unknowability, or to turn away from the character, condemning the character for his or her opacity. Through the systematic avoidance of psychological or emotional insights into her films’ characters, Akerman addresses her spectator in an ethical manner, asking the spectator to contemplate his or her own consideration of the unknowable other. In many of Akerman’s films, Akerman asks the spectator to consider not just characters Akerman creates, but Akerman herself. Akerman appears in several of her films, namely *Saute ma ville*, *Je tu il elle*, *News From Home*, *D’Est, Sud*, and *De l’autre côté*. She is sometimes present only as an offscreen voice or voice-over; sometimes she features as a character or (as in the documentary films) as an unseen figure behind the camera.

In *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday*, Ivone Margulies notes that Akerman’s self-presentation in films²¹³ works to present a “non-fixed identity.”²¹⁴ For Margulies, “[b]oth the serious and the comic films mock the possibility of grafting a fixed identity into a film, whether through [Aurore] Clément’s presence [as Akerman’s alter-ego] 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.”²¹⁵ In

²¹² *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York : Fordham University Press, 2005, 136.

²¹³ *Sud* and *De l’autre côté* post-date the publication of Margulies’ book.

²¹⁴ *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday*, 17.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

an article examining Akerman's 'chambre' films, that is, the films which foreground a single room as their setting, Margulies adds that "the Akerman-chamber is neither conducive to psychodrama nor propitious to self-exposure. Akerman's presence in the films has a performative purpose rather than a referential quality."²¹⁶ Margulies' remarks underscore the ways in which Akerman's self-presentation shares similarities with Akerman's presentation of fictional characters: neither presentation offers fixed, or 'knowable,' identities. The remainder of this section will examine Akerman's self-presentation in detail to further draw out this connection. While a detailed discussion of each of the films in which Akerman appears is, unfortunately, a larger project than can be undertaken here, I will concentrate on Akerman's recent film *Là-bas* (2006) in order to assess the nature of Akerman's self-presentation and its effects on Akerman's ethical address, as it has been discussed so far.

Là-bas recounts Akerman's visit to Tel Aviv. The visual track of *Là-bas* consists largely of interior, fixed camera shots of the window of Akerman's darkened apartment. The camera looks out, through the blinds, onto the balconies and streets outside. While Akerman slightly varies the position of her camera (closer to or further from the window, etc), the film's visual track is predominately made up of images of Akerman's neighbors engaged in various activities on their balconies. Occasionally, these interior shots are juxtaposed with exterior shots of Tel Aviv – these include exterior sequences in which Akerman takes her camera to the beach and films individuals there, or in which she positions her camera on her balcony. In contrast to the visual track, we receive information about Akerman almost exclusively through the soundtrack. We hear her

²¹⁶ Margulies, Ivone. "La Chambre Akerman: The Captive as Creator." *Rouge* 10 (2007) <<http://www.rouge.com.au/10/akerman.html>> (accessed 11 Jan 2008). No pagination.

phone conversations with friends and relatives and listen to the monologues she speaks in voice-over. It quickly becomes clear during the film that Akerman only rarely leaves her apartment. This state of affairs is evidently exacerbated when, as Akerman tells us, she walks to the beach to buy cigarettes and discovers that she has very narrowly missed a suicide bombing which killed four people. Avoiding explicit analysis of this incident or the larger political situation in Israel, *Là-bas* instead, like so many of Akerman's films, focuses on questions of identity and representation of identity.

In *Là-bas*, Akerman presents herself to the spectator in a manner which emphasizes the opaque nature of identity: she does not know herself fully, and thus the spectator cannot 'know' her, her thoughts, feelings, reactions, etc. She accomplishes this presentation through a number of different stylistic devices. Most obviously, her almost total lack of appearance onscreen denies the spectator any avenue through which to 'read' Akerman – we cannot discern her state of mind by examining her facial expressions or body language. Rather than displaying herself onscreen, Akerman instead provides endless images of other people – strangers. In this way, while remaining present by constantly speaking over the image, she visually associates herself with unknown others. Greg Youmans points out that Akerman's camera set-up in the film does not 'suture' the spectator's view to Akerman's view, but rather points out the separation between the two: "Akerman conveys her message to us, not through identification or the suturing of our gaze to her own but rather, through the perpetually restaged denial of any such identification or suture."²¹⁷ Even Akerman's constant speech over the image does not provide the spectator a way to read Akerman – she delivers her speech in a monotone

²¹⁷ Youmans, Greg. "Ghosted Documentary: Chantal Akerman's *Là-bas*." *Millennium Film Journal* 51 (Spr/Sum 2009): 70-80, p. 79.

voice, denying her words any inflection that might indicate to the spectator that Akerman is experiencing any specific emotion.

A second avenue by which Akerman troubles the spectator's access to her subjective viewpoint is through the promotion of contradictory or conflicting identity traits. A device common to Akerman's fictional films, Angela Stukator describes Akerman's promotion of "internal differences, contradictions and tensions which could potentially blur the boundaries of a category"²¹⁸ as a way to disrupt the 'logic of identity;' this is a logic which maintains that identity is coherent, unified and whole.²¹⁹ By foregrounding conflicting elements of her characters' identities, Akerman avoids representations of identity which can be easily read, interpreted, and 'known' by the spectator, as the spectator brings his or her own associations to bear on that identity.

In *Là-bas*, the information Akerman provides to the audience about her subjectivity cannot be placed within any reductive category of identity: for example, the spectator sees repeated shots of Akerman's darkened apartment – evidence of the seemingly solitary, inactive life Akerman leads. As such, the spectator may be tempted to label and thus know Akerman as 'fearful' or agoraphobic, or as having some other psychological infirmity. As the film progresses, however, Akerman disrupts such a labeling: she does go outside for periods within the film, using her motionless video camera to film individuals as they walk along the beach and, on one occasion, filming briefly on her balcony; when Akerman's friends and relatives call her on the phone, she is curt and politely refuses their invitations to meet, again leading the spectator to think of her as an anti-social person. In the last few minutes of the film, however, Akerman again

²¹⁸ Ibid., 119.

²¹⁹ Stukator, Angela. "Critical Categories and the (Il)logic of Identity." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*. Vol. 2 Issue 2/3 (1993): 117-128, p. 118.

upturns this reading when she reveals that she is sad that a cousin with whom she has been spending time is leaving the next day – “It’s too bad,” Akerman says. “I like having my cousin near me. She seems to know how to live.” Akerman’s reticence to talk to her family and friends on the phone is also contrasted with the prolonged, often rambling monologues which Akerman speaks to the spectator in voice-over, further disallowing any easy reading of Akerman as a quiet or withdrawn individual.

Akerman’s particular use of language in *Là-bas* constitutes another aspect of Akerman’s opacity to the spectator. As Margulies discusses in *Nothing Happens*, Akerman works, in her use of dialogue, to downplay the referential nature of language; she does this in various ways, including her use of cliché and monotone or sing-song voices.²²⁰ In *Là-bas*, like her other films, Akerman drains her speech of its meaning by repeating phrases – she says many times in the film, for example, “I read complicated books about the Jews” or “It’s complicated.” She also discusses tangential details at great length. At one point in the film, she describes in detail the employment history of her cousin in Belgium; at another point, she recounts all the things she will need to do in order to replace a loaf of bread she has eaten out of her landlord’s freezer. Though she talks a great deal in the film, Akerman disrupts the notion that this talking expresses anything meaningful about her interior world. She contradicts herself, repeats herself and speaks so much as to both exceed the requirements of and overwhelm the possibility of communication.

When Akerman does speak directly about her feelings in *Là-bas*, she only describes the ways in which she is detached from others: “I’m just disconnected from practically everything,” she says. “I float.” Or, when speaking about herself, Akerman

²²⁰ Margulies. See 154-161 of *Nothing Happens* particularly.

accentuates her opacity to herself. She says, “If my father is a descendent of the Rabbi of Belze, then so am I, I tell myself. I search within myself to see if I can feel it. Yes, yes I feel it. No, no I can’t anymore. What is it to feel it anyway? I don’t know.” While one might assume in *Là-bas* that Akerman’s Judaism or her connection to Jewish history provides an avenue through which to understand or know Akerman, she entirely dispels this possibility in remarks like these. She tells the spectator that her Jewish identity confounds her, constituting an aspect of her unknowability to herself – an aspect which is, of course, reflected in her feelings of isolation and disconnection from Israel. In this way then, again, Akerman presents herself to the spectator as unknowable, both by herself and others. By stressing her own unknowability to the spectator, Akerman is articulating Butler’s argument that one cannot fully know the other.

Returning to Judith Butler’s argument in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, we can see that Akerman’s emphasis on her own unknowability has ethical implications. By confronting the spectator with the mutability and inconsistency of her own identity, Akerman points to Butler’s claim that

the question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received.²²¹

For Butler, the ethical lies in this act of acknowledgement or recognition, and it is this that Akerman, through her self-presentation as unknowable, asks of her spectator.

²²¹ *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21.

Akerman in *Là-bas* fashions herself as disconnected from others, hidden away in a dark apartment. Though this may seem to imply that there can be no ethical encounter between Akerman and another in this film, the opposite is true. Though some of the verbal track of *Là-bas* consists of Akerman's phone conversations with family and friends, much of the voice-over is Akerman telling her thoughts to the spectator. Akerman's speech about herself (which is, of course, revelatory only up to a certain point. Akerman's aforementioned use of language and self-attribution of contradictory identity traits prevents the spectator from using Akerman's speech to create a full picture of Akerman's identity – to fully 'know' her) requires the spectator as addressee, as something separate and other from Akerman, to gain meaning. As Akerman speaks perpetually to the spectator, she is revealing her need for recognition from the spectator. Her address is dependent upon us for acknowledgement; as Butler writes, "If I have no 'you' to address, then I have lost 'myself.'" Despite Akerman's withdrawal from others, and her visual withdrawal from the spectator, *Là-bas* depicts Akerman as having constant concern and care for other human beings, whether these are the strangers she watches or her impenetrable aunt who committed suicide and whom Akerman discusses repeatedly. Akerman is asking us whether, similarly, we can care and feel for Akerman without knowing her, without knowing what she feels.

In the final minutes of *Là-bas* Akerman verbally recounts a meeting in her apartment between herself and 'the man from the university' (she gives no further description of the man). This is the only time in the film that Akerman describes a prolonged encounter between herself and another person during her time in Tel Aviv. Her description of their conversation intimates an ethical exchange of recognition; an

encounter not about knowledge, but about seeing the value and singularity of the other, and being seen in return. Akerman mentions to him that she is concerned about cleaning and otherwise restoring her apartment to its previous state. She tells us, “he smiles. He rises and opens the drapes. The air, the light pours in. For a few seconds, I’m blinded. Then, I can see again. He says, ‘it’s hard to get out of prison. Especially your own prison, but you do get out.’ I don’t dare ask how. Another time, maybe. But when he leaves, I realize he has done me good...He’s calm, and he knows. He knows exile, prison, inside, outside. Well, I think he does.”

Shortly after Akerman’s description of this encounter, she breaks the visual pattern of *Là-bas* as we have seen it thus far: cutting away from the ubiquitous shot of the window, Akerman cuts to a frenetic montage sequence including shots of the sky, the beach, the city. There is camera movement in each shot, and Akerman has sped up the video to increase the feeling of dynamism and activity. This sequence is both jarring and ecstatic in its departure from the stillness of the rest of the film. Is this sequence emblematic of Akerman’s desire to burst out of the apartment? Out of herself? Is it a visual analogue of emotional turmoil? Of the sensation of being recognized by another? There are no answers to these questions – Akerman’s ethical address lies in the way she directs us to contemplate our feelings about her, despite the lack of answers. Akerman’s ethical address places the spectator in a position to apprehend the specificity and irreducibility of another, while also confronting our inability to investigate and know that other. After the montage, Akerman returns us to our previous position within her apartment. Now, however, we realize that something has changed: we can see Akerman, obscurely reflected in a mirror to the right of the window. She is brushing her teeth. This

change brings us not quite face to face with this woman with whom we have spent so much time; Akerman is here unknowable, perhaps, and though the spectator may or may not heed the film's ethical urging, *Là-bas* shows Akerman to be, nonetheless, recognizable.

Concluding Remarks

In this thesis, I have endeavored to uncover the connections between the films of Chantal Akerman and the conception of ethics presented by Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*; I have argued that Akerman's films are, in their spectatorial address, ethical. Analyzing the films *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*, I have shown that Akerman utilizes various filmic devices in order to present the characters of Anna and Jeanne as opaque, or 'unknowable.' Though she denies her spectator access to Anna and Jeanne's interior worlds for the majority of the films, Akerman, in the latter parts of *Jeanne Dielman* and *Les rendez-vous d'Anna*, confronts her spectator with the existence of the characters' interior world. In this confrontation, Akerman places her spectator in the position to consider the feelings of the other, the character, without knowing what that other feels. I have illustrated how, according to the paradigm Butler lays out in her work, the form of character Akerman presents in these films thus models an ethical address.

In chapter 2, I examined the changes in this ethical address which result when Akerman presents characters that are dramatically different from those found in her 1970s films. The characters in the films *Un divan à New York*, *La captive* and *Demain on*

déménagement differ from the quiet, distant characters of Anna and Jeanne – they are, instead, talkative, proximate and physically expressive. However, through an analysis of Akerman’s use of dialogue and her attribution of contradictory and confusing identity traits to her characters in these films, I have argued that the characters Akerman presents in these films retain the opacity and unknowability found in the earlier films. She achieves this opacity by emphasizing, to her spectator, the characters’ opacity to themselves. Looking at the depiction of love in *Un divan à New York*, the presentation of family and the references to the Holocaust in *Demain on déménage* and the switching of alignment, or point of view, in *La Captive*, I have outlined the ways in which these films present and re-formulate the ethical address found in Akerman’s 1970s films. Finally, analyzing Akerman’s recent film *Là-bas*, I have discussed the ways in which Akerman presents herself as unknowable to her spectator, mining the presentation of her own identity as an ethical resource for her films.

My purpose in this thesis has been to contribute to the literature on Chantal Akerman’s films, as well as to the critical project of delineating the interactions between the study of film and ethical philosophy. The originality of my discussion of Akerman’s films is found in the act of bringing ethical considerations to bear on Akerman’s work, arguing both that Akerman’s films have an inherent ethical quality and that, as a filmmaker, Akerman’s understanding of the ethical informs the entirety of her filmmaking project. While books like *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* consider individual films in relation to different ethical theories, addressing the overall work of a filmmaker through the lens of a specific ethical theory constitutes a new approach. Bringing Judith Butler’s discussion of ethics into conjunction with the study of film has

also provided a novel approach to both Akerman's work and larger considerations of the nature of the interaction between film and spectator. I have attempted to show in this thesis that Akerman's films present an ideal paradigm of the ethical possibilities of film, foregrounding the responsibility of the spectator towards a film and the world represented in that film. My over-arching aim in this thesis has been to address the astounding work of Chantal Akerman, and to show that Akerman's attention to her spectator, and her construction of certain kind of interaction between spectator and character, marks Akerman's filmmaking as an ethical project.

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