



Cinema of the Grandmother

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All right, so it's grandmother; but in reality it's any young girl in 1864. The girl smiles continuously, always the same smile. The smile is arrested yet no longer refers to the life from which it has been taken. Likeness has ceased to be of any help.

—Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography" (1928)¹

Truth is when it is itself no longer. Disease, Thought-Woman, Spider-Woman, griotte, storyteller, fortune-teller, witch. If you have the patience to listen, she will take delight in relating it to you. An entire history, an entire vision of the world, a lifetime story. Mother always has a mother.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Grandma's Story" (1989)²

Margarete, an eighty-five-year-old East German woman, is surrounded by the jubilant revelry of scores of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, who have all congregated in a hall to celebrate her diamond anniversary of marriage to Hermann. They dance, drink, and reminisce. The gathering relays a harmonious, endearing portrait of multiple generations, with the great-grandmother at its center. The merriment continues through the evening, as the family poses in a group arrayed together for the film camera, identifying themselves with raised hands by generation when prompted by the filmmaker. They sing a song in unison. Yet in a private moment in her bedroom the next day, Margarete gives an account of herself that undoes what this film, Helke Misselwitz's *Winter adé (After Winter Comes Spring, 1988)*, has just shown us from the night prior. Before she knows the camera has started rolling, Margarete hides and giggles behind a framed photographic portrait, held in her lap, of herself at age twenty-two. She begins to speak more candidly of her "nimbleness" as a girl, when she worked at the nearby castle, where she learned how to pickle and clean, and of the gentry who wanted to buy her to be their own child. She shifts toward darker memories: her conscription into marriage due to a pregnancy, the volatility of the relationship. As her regrets volley forth, Margarete's bearing punctures the illusion of wedded bliss, particularly regarding the man to whom she has been "happily" married for sixty years. "He's not a very good man ... I should have married a better man," she says wincingly, gesturing hurriedly, in fear that he might hear. The subsequent farewell image indicates the filmmaker's imminent departure, as Misselwitz holds on a suspended portrait pose in long shot of the elderly couple. They look at the camera while standing, unmoving, in front of their village home—a stillness that underscores the tragic bitterness of Margarete's life, in which she has been playing a sixty-year role.

This striking scene, which appears two-thirds of the way into a film in which multiple women across East Germany recount their lives, attests to the manifold ways that the image of the grandmother in nonfiction cinema both models and unravels historical modes of telling, and unsettles expectations of testimony. Made just before the collapse of the GDR, *Winter adé* discloses the power of the observational mode in giving attentive space to women as complex, multivalent, and ambivalent subjects. Asked to comment on her own youthful photograph, Margarete oscillates between pride in the supple girlishness of her past self, holding the image as if it were a badge of her continued existence, and a melancholy that seeps out as she radically revises her own narrative in an intimate space of quiet questioning. This encounter, in which the photorealist image, across photography and film, operates dialectically, to both secure and undo our knowledge, spurs me to consider the valence of the grandmother as one of the privileged figures of feminist nonfiction film.



Nonfiction made by women in the opening swells of second-wave feminist consciousness in the early 1970s took up, evaluated, and critiqued the bonds between mothers and daughters that are so constitutive of the relation between women. The subject of motherhood has always informed the development of feminist thought, where it is present as a crucial domain for thinking and unthinking the bonds of kinship, authority, and ideology in the structuring of women's lives within industrial capitalism. A foundational structure and site of self-formation, motherhood was and remains the thorny stake central both to battles over women's autonomy, futurity, and self-determination, as well as to human history insofar as it relies on the gendered labor of social reproduction. The examination of motherhood found in the documentaries emerging out of the consciousness raising impulse of the 1970s and 1980s forayed into the formations of women's subjectivities and aspirations, as well as gestures of differentiation, rebuke, and departure. This wide and diverse corpus frequently returns to the questions of memory and generation as articulated on the terrain of family histories and self-representation.

But another figure of care envelops motherhood, holds it up, stands for it: Who else gives the mother life and possibility, portending the vista of other histories, signaling the generativity of generation, within but also beyond family, than the mother's mother, the woman and women who came before you? The grandmother is often present in feminist nonfiction film's narratives of self-articulation and social structuration, even when occupying the background or resting in a corner just out of frame. A measure of a certain generative distance, she offers a portal to family histories and cultural and political exigencies through other means. "Mother always has a mother," Trinh T. Minh-ha declares, relaying how the grandmother as fount of oral tradition, transmitter of a "lifetime story," requires listeners, keepers, and disseminators beyond her.³ The grandmother's munificent presence in the nonfiction cinema of women filmmakers across distinct geopolitical contexts attests to her persistence as a figure of feminist historicity; "the first before the first," to revise Siegfried Kracauer's formulation concerning the philosophy of history.⁴ The "cinema of the grandmother" stands for not one but a multiplicity of transhistorical constellations and correlations between women. Not least of all, the grandmother speaks at the limit of what cinema's historical narrativity can convey. When summoned to tell her own narrative, her self-inscription as historical subject through the knotty disclosures of her private reckoning, Margarete of *Winter adé* complicates and rebukes the injunction to deliver a story of oneself as necessarily single, consistent, or self-identical. She is one of many grandmothers whose self-narration plunges the spectator into a questioning of the founding fictions of

narrativity as a mechanism of securing closure, stability, and certainty. The feminist impulse to navigate a history beyond oneself has often reached for the grandmother as simultaneously an ancestral figure and a fount of historicity. Through her, the cobblestones on the path toward historical continuity could be cemented, and a desire for solidarity across the gaping breaches of historical time, lived experience, and ideological divergence could be articulated. The grandmother's very existence worries the limits of how one might have lived, or what one might have or could have known. Grandmothers populate the body of women's nonfiction cinema. They are privileged subjects and mediums themselves for the work of testimony, the construction of history, and of the lineage of women's lived experience, from Amalie Rothschild's *Nana, Mom and Me* (1974) to Barbara Hammer's *Optic Nerve* (1985) and *My Babushka: Searching Ukrainian Identities* (2001), and from Margaret Tait's *Portrait of Ga* (1952) to Arlene Bowman's *Navajo Talking Picture* (1985). The grandmother bears a capacity to stand in for a lived relation to the filmmaker (Martha Coolidge's *Old-Fashioned Woman* [1974]), something identificatory or projective beyond that lived relation (Mirra Bank's *Yudie* [1974], Fronza Woods's *Fannie's Film* [1981], or Naomi Uman's *Kalendar* [2008]), and a genealogy at odds with received histories, an agent of counter-historical force (Byun Young-joo's *The Murmuring* [1995]). She has long been a feminist filmic resource, a way to think laterally across generations, articulating a relationship to the past, to social rituals, the historicity of gender and patriarchy's demands, and the witnessing of historical trauma and oppression.

The grandmother also operates as a very specific proxy for the thickness and entanglement of any given story of lineage, inheritance, or the bequeathing of storytelling itself. What is narrated by the grandmother? And what does the grandmother refuse to narrate? Such questions have long animated feminist historiography and theories of gendered and raced subjectivity, especially as the oral traditions and embodied knowledges transmitted across generations have sustained alternative narrations of history and History.

One of feminist history's desires, untold, is the desire for the grandmother.

Stretching backward, there is something pressing about the grandmother's figurability, her allegorical capacity, when held in the frame of an early-twentieth-century representational imaginary. In George Albert Smith's *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900), one of the earliest films to employ close-ups and point-of-view shots, the grandmother becomes a special effect of a sort, a medium for the scaling of perspective. The premise of



her reduced vision is a pretext for her prosthetic "eyes" being borrowed by her grandson to probe the phenomenal world at closer range; the grandmother's perspective is borrowed and remodeled in the shape of the novelty and wonder that the filmic medium unexpectedly opens up for its spectators.

She appears as a comparable concept-object in foundational critical thinking of photorealist representation and its relation to memory's transcription and dissipation: Siegfried Kracauer's epochal ruminations on photography and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* before it. The grandmother secures a means to grasp at the elusive nature of temporal experience in modernity. Lens and prism, the trope of the grandmother bears an alliance with reproductive technologies of vision and prosthetic devices of memory, appearing in the dialectic of contemporaneity and tradition. The implications of her positioning as both material remnant and animating abstraction inscribe the history of thinking the photographic image and its techniques of capture. In Proust's third volume, the narrator describes what occurs after a long spell of absence from his grandmother. He recounts a reunion marked by the strangeness of her ailing visage as he enters her room before she realizes his presence. He imagines this alienation as the intrusion of a photographic lens, an objectivation that punctuates his last memory of her—a shock provoked by her estranged appearance, her withering life, and the initial withdrawal of her gaze, lost as she is in her private thoughts. The grandmother becomes a "photograph" for the narrator in the moment of his temporary recession from the grandmother's recognition and his recognition of her.⁵ Rather than the "transparency of contiguous and overlapping memories," suddenly he sees a disrupted reflection in which her features are vulgarized and made coarse. She becomes "a crushed old woman whom I did not know."⁶ Here, the grandmother and photography together become means of exploring the bounds of temporality. The photographic imprint grows sinister in that it underlines the grandmother's alterity in her closeness to death, fundamentally aligned with an embedded capacity toward invoking alienation.

Kracauer, too, clutches at the photographed grandmother as expository medium of memory and history. In his epochal rumination on photography, written in 1928, he contemplates the elusive quality of locating the grandmother in the flow of her youth, caught in the flux of historical time. In the face of a desire for continuity, historical knowledge, or epistemic stability that might be secured through the photographic medium, he traces her evanescence. Meditating on an image of a youthful, glamorous, twenty-four-year-old film diva, Kracauer juxtaposes the gamine's contemporaneity with a second woman at the same age as the ingenue: the grandmother in her inscrutable, unknown youth. "Is this

what *grandmother* looked like?" Kracauer asks.⁷ The question tears a hole in the world of appearances. Would we recognize the woman we know as grandmother in her twenties? How does her image attest to the minutes, years, and hours that have passed since its capture, through which her visage grows blurry, unrecognizable, tantamount to that of "all women," or rather of any other woman of her time? He yearns for a provenance that yields only gaps, as the grandmother shifts, crumbles, folds, and disappears in the crinkles of her chignons and crinolines.

What does envisioning the grandmother's youth, heretofore unimagined and unseen, do for a history of the photographic image? What desires—for politics, erotics, and self-imaginings—lurk in this impulse of youthful restitution? The imperative to braid the grandmother's being together with the ontological facture of the photographic image, found in Proust and Kracauer, expresses deep-seated presumptions, longings, and projections. These undergird the theorization of the medium and its historicity as a reproductive form, but they also point to the grandmother as figurative sign, as limit case and vehicle for the possibility of inheritance and the material reproducibility of life itself.

The grandmother's insistent presence sits in the gap between being ours and belonging to an anonymous eternity that stretches past the imprecise shadings of any given personal memory. She is at once a proxy for historical inaccessibility and a ground for generation and genealogy. In this distant intimacy, she signals the limits of the photographic medium, in its reproduction of the mere "spatial continuum" within which she existed and expired. The grandmother shuttles between being a casualty of time, of human mnemonic opacity, and stricken by photography, which clouds her integral personhood, even as it fixes her into place, a moment, a sliver, of spatialized time. Yet her material presence is equally worn away, even in remembrance. In the photograph Kracauer describes (of his own grandmother, perhaps), she is shrouded in the anachronism of dated clothes and draping garments, these remnant things that can barely take inventory of the grandmother's belonging to *this* world and not some other.

Siegfried Kracauer and Marcel Proust drew on the grandmother's visage as a figure for the very ground of historical and aesthetic imagination, a way to explore how literature and photography could give shape to the anxious, melancholic, and haunted subjectivities generated by industrial modernity. Yet the grandmother herself as the subject of her own narration (as historical, willful agent) would need to find her own forms of articulation, her own modes of recovery and reanimation. What the wistful gazes Kracauer and Proust cast onto the grandmother could barely anticipate



were the catastrophes of World War II: the camps, mass genocide, atomic annihilation, so many calamities giving form to an impossible abyss between generality and particularity. The war's cataclysms ruptured understandings of teleology, human continuity, and models of universal humanist accord—the topoi within which the prewar grandmother, as romantic concept and ideality, was contained and given shape.

Winter adé suggests a different trajectory for the problem of communing with the grandmother, from the perspective of a gendered intergenerationality facilitated by photography and cinema. The dialectics and aporias of the image emerge from Margarete's dialogue with and between her own (photographic) representation and (cinematic) self-representation. The confrontation between photographic inscription and cinematic self-inscription indicates the nonidentity between historical subjects as pictured by a medium and spoken subjectivities in states of unfolding, questioning, and reframing.

Misselwitz was not alone in probing the received modes of women's self-narration and what cinema might offer to notions of women's history. It is women (filmmakers, writers, historians) who have contended with the implications of what Trinh T. Minh-ha describes—in the particular context of women of color who write the self as history—as the elder woman storyteller's "lifetime story." These are stories that take a lifetime to transmit, that are embodied in the ongoing flesh of a life that cannot be cut up into facts and measures, that last an immeasurable duration. These stories, which demand to be told, "will take a long time for living cannot be told, not merely told, as living is not livable," as Trinh reminds us.⁸ Rather than a receding mental image, a figure of otherness, or a pure emblem of historical difference and the ambivalent implications of technological capture, here the grandmother is witness, bearer of testimony, a material link to lives written otherwise. Trinh is right: there is no "mere telling" that can model a précis of livability, make living livable, to extrapolate a generalizable claim from an irreducible specificity. The "living unlivable" reverberates in the aftermaths of war and in the voices of the grandmothers who are bidden to chronicle its losses and remains.

Perhaps the most striking films that propose the grandmother as a shifting site of identification, connection, and relation are works in which no explicit or direct biological family relation exists between filmmaker and subject. In these works, the kinship that might solder family bonds is transposed into the potential of wider, non-filial yet deeply felt solidarity across generational difference, and other differences beside. Such films represent the ultimate potentiality of the grandmother as an emblem

of feminist historiography, not as neat reproductive chain but as a relationship that can be extended toward a feminist feeling for history.

One such film comes from Chantal Akerman, a “minor” yet major work in her filmography that fuses into paradox the principle of “no grandmother” and “everybody’s grandmother.” *Aujourd’hui, dis-moi* (*Tell Me*, 1980), a modest and profound forty-five-minute film, was made as an episode for a French television series on *grand-mères* produced by Jean Frapat. It shuttles between a personal search for the shadow of Akerman’s Polish Jewish grandmother, whom the filmmaker never knew due to her young death in Auschwitz, and the countenance of communal grief across several generations of Jewish women.

Emerging from an underground station at Place de la République, the Belgian Akerman walks through the streets of Paris. As she perambulates, we hear the voice of her mother Natalia answering her daughter’s invitation to “tell me what you remember about your mother.” Natalia, a Polish émigrée who arrived in Brussels in 1938 with her parents before being deported with them when the Nazis invaded Belgium a few years later, recounts how she lost her mother and father, both killed in Auschwitz. She returned from the camp dispossessed and parentless to live with her grandmother, cousins and aunts, shorn of most of the family. Natalia relates: “My grandmother made a home for me, I didn’t feel like an orphan ... she did everything to keep us warm, as if we were in a nest.” As these words loosen, Akerman arrives at the door of an elderly Jewish woman who invites her in and Natalia’s voice-over further states, “My grandmother did everything for me.” So begins the film, structured with a deceptive simplicity, as Akerman visits three Jewish women in their sixties or seventies, all Holocaust survivors, like Natalia herself. Her mother’s voice, heard in the interludes between each interview as Akerman ambles through the streets of Paris, links the details of personal family history with a collective penumbra of loss.

That the psychic comportment of Akerman’s parents as survivors of the Shoah made a deep impression on the filmmaker’s aesthetic imaginary is well-documented.⁹ *Aujourd’hui, dis-moi* is the first film in her oeuvre that features her mother, in her own voice, present in the plenitude of an aural register (in contrast to the letters written by her but voiced by Akerman in the earlier *News from Home* of 1977). It is also the first of Akerman’s films to directly address her own family history, even if only as an animating background, serving as it does as the connective tissue between the narratives of her subjects.

Through this palimpsestic recounting, we get only a sliver of an image of Akerman’s grandmother, Sidonie, before she recedes from the



mother’s recollections. Natalia describes her as “beautiful,” a detail swiftly followed with the assertion that she was sent to her death at age thirty-five. Akerman probes at the vacated episteme created by her grandmother’s absence, via the elderly women she calls upon to recount their lives, through whom a vista on the past might be glimpsed. Akerman is tied to these three women by a loose associative kinship in the shared trauma that they, her grandmother, and her mother endured. Film scholar Alisa Lebow has identified a tendency for what she calls “transitive autobiography” in Akerman’s later nonfiction essay, *D’Est* (*From The East*, 1993), in which she travels across her parents’ homeland Poland, former East Germany, and Russia in the immediate years after the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ We see some trajectory toward the shape of her later nonfiction work in *Aujourd’hui, dis-moi*: a searching return to absent origins, to an Eastern Europe scarred by the annihilations of its twentieth-century history, from pogroms to fascism and Stalinism. Akerman’s curiosity and desire to commune, however indirectly, with the culture of her ancestors, to “sit at what remains of the Jewish table,” as writer Adam Roberts suggests, responds to the traumatic inheritance of enduring the unthinkable.¹¹ The desire for the grandmother here emerges in practices of listening, receptivity, and silent accounting, as Akerman’s presence allows each woman to elaborate her lifetime story. They do so gingerly, selectively. The repetitions, ellipses, and rhymes between them accumulate across the sequence of visits, becoming formal signs, like much of Akerman’s work—resounding tropes of return, wraithlike in their delicate yet bruising impact.

Meeting these sagacious, reticent, and vivacious *grand-mères* in their homes, Akerman asserts a kinship that is a complex admixture of affinities, marked by a sense of belonging or likeness through rituals of Jewish and Eastern European domestic spheres. In her writing on émigré sensibilities of post-Soviet life, Svetlana Boym describes the nature of an affective state that gets closer to the quality of affinity and solidarity that Akerman’s film and approach to her subjects inhabits. For Boym, “diasporic intimacy” is a mode that dwells not in pure nostalgia; rather, it is

not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it. Diasporic intimacy can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets. It is spoken of in a foreign language that reveals the inadequacies of translation. Diasporic intimacy does not promise an unmediated emotional fusion but only a precarious affection—no less deep, while aware of its transience. In contrast to the utopian images of intimacy as transparency, authenticity and ultimate belonging, diasporic intimacy is dystopian by definition; it is rooted in the suspicion of a single home, in shared longing without belonging.¹²

In the communion with tradition that these women represent, Akerman's bond to her subjects is tendered through this aspect of precarity, in aleatory moments of vulnerability and transient senses of situating the self within estrangement. These links are also orchestrated through the ceremonial and declarative style of older Jewish women's storytelling, to which the film's title refers. This grandmotherly mode of self-narration is woven together with the activities and routines of caregiving and nourishment, linking the pleasure of oral history with an appetitive orality, an indulgence in taste, smell, and consumption that is anchored in the traditional hearth, in all that is conjured from meager means and privation into nutritive replenishment. The visit-interview of *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi* mimics the familiar pilgrimage to one's grandmother's house, a ritual to which any Eastern European Jewish granddaughter is habituated; it is an ordinary, everyday routine, even if for Akerman it is counterfactual. *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi* retains an atmosphere replete with the extended seated interrogation, the dialogue of host and guest at the kitchen or dining table, the plying with copious plates of food, and the immaculate if baroque decor, laden with tchotchkes or bereft of them, the prized armature of the china cabinet, the framed photographs, thick curtains, crystal vases, and candy dishes placed just so—fortresses of abundance as much as protective moats against despair.

The spoken and unspoken legacies of the grandmothers are scenographies of self-narration haunted by the dead: Sidonie, mother of Natalia, the mother who never could become in her lifetime the grandmother of Chantal. The lost ancestor, experienced as founding absence, becomes a holographic conduit to a web of shared histories in stories that can only be told implicitly, in ellipses, precarious silences, mediations, and redirections. Each survivor greets Akerman with the warm, hospitable grace of the familial, yet with different measures of circumspection as they weave between that which can be told and what must remain unspoken. Hearing these disclosures in the space of each home also produces a felt disjunction, as each woman's comfortable, placid surroundings abrade against the harrowing experiences they speak of in passing, elliptically, or with abrupt pockets of silence. Akerman serves triply, as visible proxy for the viewer's own listening, as director of the scene, and as designee for the knowledge they relay: a surrogate granddaughter, listener, and recipient of the grandmother's accreted wisdom. Akerman's serene facial expression and unobtrusive gaze punctuates and mediates their most painful admissions.¹³

The first two interviewees begin with a refusal: "I don't have much to say"; "I don't have much to tell about myself." Akerman's first host is the most genial as she presents a narrative of largely elided horrors, inadvertently producing a picture of overcoming as they sit in mid-shot



at a highly polished maple dining table, flanked by thick orange curtains, and with a rubber plant in the background. They drink tea with lemon in clear mugs—the Eastern European way—while nibbling a presliced golden pound cake. The table's polished, reflective surface effects a mirroring and splitting of the image. The questioning goes both ways, as the elder asks Akerman about her family, what or who remains, whether she has children. The *grand-mère* dwells on Akerman's childlessness, advising her that children "bring a lot of joy" and "make life less lonely." Such grandmotherly questions and upbraiding guilt highlight the doubled register of Akerman's queerness, uncajoled as she is into social reproduction. Akerman's relation to these women is freighted with the density of a yearning for an ungiven past of which they are instrumental echoes, as communion meets a chasmic tenor of wounded difference.

As sincere counsel, implicit judgment, and enthusiasm for the futurity maternal reproduction can bring, the importance of children is expressed in a different, more desperate sense by the second woman Akerman interviews. She describes how she "needed to have a child to be reborn"; her desire to have "millions of children to erase all the injustice" was the primary passage out of the negativity and desolation of the Shoah's trauma, a path toward a restitution. Bearing children signaled a means of worldly repair, a self-salving that is poignantly held against Akerman's own mute distance from reproductive desire. The second *grand-mère* presents a more reticent account of the toll of genocide as she describes her mother's rebuke of any allegiance to France after the war. Sitting in a rust-colored armchair in a painterly, stilled posture, she describes with measured, aggrieved restraint her parents' betrothal, the family's transit from Egypt to Palestine then to France, and the latter's false promises of safe harbor as her father, a violinist and aspiring conductor, was deported and gassed at Auschwitz. On arrival in France, she says that her own mother, a lively woman, "stopped singing," her vivacity disappearing. In the clipped, austere, and pared down details of her experiences, she offers an inverse image to the more congenial, tamped down account that comes just prior. The ellipses between childhood, war, and aftermath are given the sting of a bracing exposure that cannot be recovered or expressed. With the woman seated in that painterly portrait pose, classical music playing behind her, the scene ends in silence and the flooding of her image with illumination, effecting a gradual overexposure. Sound and light proffer a small shard of a redemptive temporality, immersing the image in a ruminative tonality.

Akerman frequently wrote about her parents' reticence to speak about their experience in the camps as survival mechanism, and how it impacted her understanding and imagining of what she could visualize about their lives and suffering: "People of my parents' generation told

themselves: we are going to spare them the story of what happened to us. Because they did not transmit their histories, I searched for a false memory, a kind of imaginary, reconstructed memory rather than the truth."¹⁴ This sense of an "invented memory," which film scholar Janet Bergstrom argues drives Akerman's work, is filtered through "borrowing" rather than inventing reminiscence in *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi*; tales that have been loaned from the edges of what Akerman's subjects can share with her, laid out at their tables.

In the interlude that follows, her mother emphasizes her grandmother's spirit of survival, the ways it signaled to her that life could go on, declaring that in this woman's spirit she was reassured that "there was a continuation." We hear the mother's gossamer descriptions as Akerman walks to her next host and her gaze cuts to a shot of the street sign of rue Ferdinand Duval, a street of weighty significance in the Marais district of Paris, which was renamed from rue des Juifs (street of the Jews) at the turn of the twentieth century. This place name is thus a submerged marker of this historically Jewish quarter dating back to the twelfth century, and the many expulsions and persecutions of French Jewry that followed.¹⁵ In such spatial cues, in a city in which Akerman is a peripatetic guest evoking the diasporic border-crossing spirit of much of her corpus, the filmmaker gestures to the cycles of recursion and return in their multiple generational meanings. Across the ravaging forces of terror and the repopulation of storied places, she alights on residues and fragments that retain tinges of other temporalities.

Singing stops and singing returns. The third, longest, and final visit Akerman makes is to a Polish Jewish émigrée who greets her with a bounteous table, a house brimming with the residues of a well-lived life, decorated with family portraits and knickknacks that provide a sense of plenty that might eclipse the austerity of the past. Dressed vibrantly in a red sweater and flowered blouse, with pearls, brooch, and red lipstick, she emits that force of "continuation" which Akerman's mother cherishes, as she elaborates on a lifetime story that could go on, following Trinh, without end. Her filmmaker guest is doted on, spoiled with food, and threatened with silence if she doesn't take part in the custom of the appetitive ritual: "Why don't you eat? I won't tell you more until you eat." She relays a domino train of tales of her grandmother Deborah's childhood in a Polish shtetl, telling of the grandmother's upbringing and impoverished resourcefulness, of stale bread, arranged marriages, and handed down prudence. As it rolls to a halt, her saga resounds in an admission: "I have so much to tell. I could talk for another eight days and not get to all of it!" She finally picks up her black tea with lemon and bites a biscuit. Akerman lets the scene of her pensive silence play in its full duration as she chews, digests, and absorbs. In this final segment of her

subject's avid recollections, the prior two visits are held in relief against an energetic and buoyant spirit of living within and through the musicality of remembrance.

The third woman tells several linked stories of her grandmother that emphasize the spiritual and the elemental, constructing a saintly forebear whose presence remains a magnetic force, a private hagiography. Her grandmother's struggles with poverty and, due to the kindness of another female mentor, a relative stranger, apprenticing to become a master seamstress are brought into the present of a later scene in which we observe this Polish-Parisian *grand-mère* sitting at her own sewing machine. It is another skill passed down from Deborah, mending at the needle, her darkened silhouette toiling with equanimity in the falling light. After the interview, we see her in the hallowed Jewish kitchen, apron on, industriously preparing a meal for Akerman, who has agreed to stay through the evening, tipping the visit from the formality of the interview into something more intimately familial. This kitchen scene is richly evocative of the spatial trappings (pastel tiles, apron, small stove, ordered rituals) of the fictional *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and its eponymous protagonist, whose preserved and embalmed domestic gestures were conceived by Akerman as a homage to the world of her mother and aunts. Over these images at the sewing machine and in the kitchen, we hear Natalia etching the image of Akerman's own grandmother into worshipful illumination, describing her hospitality ("She loved seeing people eating at the table") and her coquettish grace ("Whenever I'd kiss her, she smelled like a rose").

Akerman's third and final host expresses a similarly tuneful adulation for her own grandmother: "She always saved me ... everything my grandmother said had come to pass," she says, relating that she believes that Deborah foretold the Holocaust before her death in 1917, proclaiming that there will be a day when "young people will not want to live." As soothsayer or oracle conjured from the recesses of her granddaughter's memory, the grandmother Deborah embodies the form-giving activities of sacramental repetition, a seeing eye whose perspicacity outlives the ravages of temporal extinguishment. In one of many mystical crescendos in this extended lifetime story, the elderly woman recounts a tale of her sister's difficult pregnancy and complicated childbirth, during which she fell gravely ill. The grandmother's spirit visits the sister in her state of unconsciousness and gives her an offering to smell. This revives the sister, who wakes to tell her family of this life-giving family ghost, Deborah, who has rescued her from that very beyond in which she lingers. "These were *real* grandmothers," her host avers.

The sensory vivacity of this memorializing disposition reaches a fullness

of feeling as, upon Akerman's invitation, she sings the songs of her mother: a "joyful" and "domineering" woman sang for her in Yiddish, all the while commenting on their meanings with plangent felicitousness. One song derives from the "candle holiday" Bar Kokhba and another speaks of a woman's desire for her dead lover as she longs for another kiss from his handsome visage. These songs inscribe another layer of transhistorical desire within the echoing tones of loss. "It's better to keep singing. A friend will see your troubles. An enemy doesn't need to see them. These are the words of my grandmother," she sagely announces early in their conversation.

To keep singing: the valence of musicality and the affective energy of song taps into a wellspring of Akerman's transformative moving image practice, but also indicates a relationship to historicity that is felt and reenacted in the summoning of the spirits and the memories of the dead, the purest form of tribute. The joyous expressivity of her subject's Yiddish serenade resonates with emergent details of Akerman's family history. After the making of *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi*, Akerman discussed the discovery of her grandmother's teenage diary at her mother's house:

And of my grandmother there remains her young girl's notebook. My mother gave it to me. She said, it will protect you. She gave it to me when I was in need of being protected and she felt powerless. She gave it to me instead of talking. She gave it to me, that's the point. It's been mine since 1984, I think. In fact everything changed in 1984. I sang so hard I exploded. Since then I explode from time to time.¹⁶

Singing and exploding, fundamental elements of Akerman's cinema, as seen from the first frame of *Saute ma ville (Blow up My Town, 1968)*, become two tracks of relation to these women's histories: harmony and conflagration, opposing yet rhyming registers of expressivity, across signal and noise, melody and cacophony. The totemic diary would provide the material for an installation, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge (2004)*, in which Akerman and her mother participate in a multimedia encounter with Sidonie's private teenage inscriptions. Akerman explores the reverberations and echoes held within the notebook, one that she, her mother, and her sister would also write notes in, joining their voices in a transhistorical relay of mother, daughters, and grandmothers in belated transmission.¹⁷

Edging toward messianic recursion, the grandmother gives ground to a spiritual imperative of fabulation, reinscribing that "all is written" and yet the past is not past. The complex temporalities of these intergenerational relays of stories suggest the grandmother as bearer of deliverance, an



angel of history, rewritten in feminist subterfuge. Akerman's visitation with these women and her generosity of attention must be understood as a kind of restitution and mourning work of its own, through which she could understand the place of her own genealogy through its very gaps, exploring in firsthand accounts the fate of the European Jewry, but also something more private, of major magnitude in a minor key.¹⁸ The terrain of traumatic inheritance also yields to a quality of an intergenerational tenderness that is exquisitely given shape in Boym's accounting of how diasporic intimacy produces feeling between brethren in estrangement:

The tenderness of exiles is about a revelation of possibility after the loss. Only when the loss has been taken for granted can one be surprised that not everything has been lost. Tenderness is not about saying what one really means ... [it] excludes absolute possession and fusion. In the words of Roland Barthes, "tenderness ... is nothing but an infinite, insatiable metonymy" and a "miraculous crystallization of the presence."¹⁹

In the images of the grandmothers and great-grandmothers summoned by Akerman's invitation to "tell me," the desire for the grandmother meets no resolution or conclusion, but opening. The images of the grandmothers flicker in and out of view, their images overlap like the superimposition of a set of transparencies that produce not a fully edged outline but a mobile revenant, an "insatiable metonymy." To the extent that the desire for the grandmother is a desire for historicity, it must fundamentally meet a confrontation with the partial, the fragment. Not so much the dated garments of Siegfried Kracauer's telling, but the acceptance of the image itself as infinitely full, yet always incomplete.

Aujourd'hui, dis-moi ends with another kind of restoration of balance. Akerman films the encounter with Deborah's granddaughter, her surrogate grandmother, to the end of the evening, windows darkening at dusk. The film's final scene, built from the transitory relationship of these two women, thirty or so years apart in age, falls into the familiarity of a more quotidian, sopitive uneventfulness that might be legible to Akerman's viewers, but no less profound or surprising for it. They eat dinner at the table, their bodies planimetrically, frontally posed, eyes watching the unseen television screen that remains behind the camera. Akerman's and the *grand-mère's* faces are absorbed between their attention to their food and a drama that unfolds off-screen, in the sound of a crime show featuring the travails of brash, tough-talking gangsters with names like Herman, Rico, and Pittsburgh Phil. Stray details of a successful "hit job" are heard as brooding music and rattling exposition vibrates from the cathode-ray tube. As the *grand-mère* pours Akerman another shot of vodka in a small-fluted glass, the exhausted filmmaker

dozes off in the blue light, bathed in the shared glow of the screen and ensconced in the comforting elsewhere of commercial serial fiction; the two cohabit the convivial scene of a softened, contented silence.

In the desire for the grandmother, there also resides the desire for the grandmother's desire, a joy that Akerman's film, in its resounding gestures toward the sensory pleasures of the matter and material of daily life, of orality and aurality, attests.

What is given in the wish, following on Siegfried Kracauer, to imagine the grandmother's youth, to seek the signs of her lived experience, the traces of her desirous presence in and with the world? Such a desire need not fall into the trap of a positivist or ontological certitude, or a romance of recovery, but it can articulate the striving for a historical surround, a historiographical will to embrace the opacities of that which remains unfixed. To contend with women's historical subjectivities requires a commitment to rethinking the nature of observation, description, and the intersubjectivities these filmic methods summon. If, indeed, the grandmother's very existence worries the limits of how one might have lived or what one might have or could have known, then her testimony and her silences complicate historical modes of telling and model feminist ways of relating to and feeling women's histories, solidarities, and collective forms of being.

Akerman's form of tender surrogacy in *Aujourd'hui, dis-moi*, her encounters with these grandmothers and their hospitality, speaks to something that is inherent in the scene of feminist historicity. The exchange operates precisely through the necessity of these older and younger women's nonrelation to each other, in which an intersubjective scenario of solidarity emerges exactly through their uneven correlation and the surrogate granddaughter's abundance of voracious curiosity, as she finds solace in the gap of the not-I. The solidarity with the grandmother offers a way of feeling history, feeling along with others' memories, toward one's own location in that history, even if that place is tantamount to Svetlana Boym's sense of longing more than belonging. The intersubjective stake of the sodality the grandmother offers, as a way of that feeling for history, also requires a leap past the grandmother's easy metaphorization. For all the loquacious and self-narrating subjects, there are also the filmic grandmothers who don't speak, who remain obstreperously silent, or who prevaricate, redirect, or insist on their own recusal from the scene. These too, as Deborah's granddaughter asserts, are the "real grandmothers."



What if many women's films are cinemas of the grandmother, even ones in which the grandmother does not appear? This can only be a speculative gesture, never a conceptual concretion or practicable claim. But it acknowledges the copresence of multiple generations in shared cinematic temporality as intrinsic to the force of women's films and their claim on spectators. This is a copresence that moves forward and backward. Sitting with and attending to many grandmothers' stories, even in their obdurances and refusals to disclose, produces a willful analogy, a pleasure and longing for the frictional, dialectical, and ambivalent force of irrecoverable alterity, a differential ground for any world held in common.

On the other hand, of course, the grandmother is also a fantasy.

1 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography" (1928), in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 48.

2 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 121.

3 Ibid.

4 See Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, trans. Paul Oskar Kristeller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

5 Heide Schlüppmann and Miriam Hansen both revisit the figural grandmother in this crossing between Marcel Proust and Siegfried Kracauer, see Schlüppmann, "The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer's *Theory of the Film*," *New German Critique*, vol. 54 (Fall 1991): pp. 111–26; Hansen "With Skin and Hair": Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, Marseille 1940," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993): pp. 433–69.

6 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 3, *The Guermandes Way*, trans. Mark Treharne. 1920–21; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2003, p. 138.

7 Kracauer, "Photography," p. 48.

8 Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 119.

9 See Janet Bergstrom, "Invented Memories," in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003; Maud Jacquin, "'A Matter of Skin': Chantal Akerman's 'Porous Narratives,'" *The Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1–2 (2019): pp. 82–95; Bruce Jenkins, "Border Crossings: Two Installations by Chantal Akerman," *Images*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2007): pp. 80–89; Alisa Lebow, "Identity Slips: The Autobiographical Register in the Work of Chantal Akerman," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 1 (2016): pp. 54–60; Ivone Margulies, "Elemental Akerman: Inside and Outside *No Home Movie*," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 1 (Fall 2016): pp. 61–69; Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

10 See Alisa Lebow, "Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman's *D'Est*," *Camera Obscura*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2003): pp. 35–82.

11 Adam Roberts, "Dis Moi—A Breakthrough

Work," *Huffington Post*, May 4, 2014, online https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/adamroberts/dis-moi---a-break-through-work-by-chantal-akerman_b_4896364.html.

12 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, pp. 252–53.

13 Ivone Margulies suggests that Chantal Akerman's presence in the film holds a tension between rumination on her mother's and grandmother's experience and the affect of exhaustion that manifests in the film through extended scenes of sitting. See Margulies, "And It's So Tiring: Chantal Akerman's Ruminative Economy," in *On Women's Films: Between Worlds and Generations*, ed. Margulies and Jeremi Szaniawski. London: Bloomsbury, 2019, pp. 49–69.

14 Chantal Akerman, quoted in Janet Bergstrom, "Chantal Akerman: Splitting," in *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 276.

15 See Robert Anchel, "The Early History of the Jewish Quarters in Paris," *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1940): pp. 45–60.

16 Chantal Akerman, exhibition material, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge*, 2004, quoted in Griselda Pollock, "The Long Journey: Maternal Trauma, Tears and Kisses in a Work by Chantal Akerman," *Studies in the Maternal*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2010): p. 32.

17 A substantial body of writing exists on Chantal Akerman's installations, including this work in particular: see Jacquin, "'A Matter of Skin'"; Pollock, "The Long Journey"; Jenny Chamarette, "Ageless: Akerman's Avatars," in *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives*, ed. Marion Schmid and Emma Wilson. Oxford: Legenda, 2019, pp. 54–65; Maureen Turim, "Next to Chantal Akerman: An Installation of Generations and the Shoah," *Camera Obscura*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2019): pp. 99–111.

18 Ivone Margulies describes this process in relation to mourning work in her essay on *No Home Movie*, see Margulies, "Elemental Akerman," pp. 61–69.

19 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 254.