

# **Why here and why now: What Role does the Punctum and Reenactment in *La Chambre* Reveal About 'Homesickness' of the Individual Spectator?**



Illustration by Anna Abotnes.

For Karen Theresa Pearce; For my Mother and Hers and Yours.

A bowl of oranges sit on a bedside table in Hertfordshire England. My mother just got back from the supermarket shop, and she thinks of me when she does. My mother buys me oranges as she knows they are my favourite – truthfully, it is mandarins that are my favourite, but that can be our secret. She would tell me the reason why I love them so much is because when she was pregnant with me, they were all she craved. As a child, I saw this as gospel and believed all children are intrinsically linked with their mothers based on their cravings, doomed to have our favourite food be what our mothers were. I considered myself lucky, as my older sister would have to eat pickled onions. My mother has not been able to buy me oranges for a while. I now live in Amsterdam where I will stay for two years, visiting home only when my time and finances will allow; and the oranges will be waiting for me on my bedside table when I come home.

We are asked about the 'archive'<sup>1</sup>, or more specifically, our individual archive. It can be a hefty question to answer, especially when work becomes increasingly niche in its interdisciplinarity. I started in film, I move to formalism in poetry and literature, philosophy. Film looms in the background like a shadow. A bright bowl of oranges reminds me of the archive's origin.

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<sup>1</sup> Singh, Julietta., *No Archive Will Restore You* in, *No Archive Will Restore You*, Punctum Books, New York, 2018, pp 22.

I bring this up based off my latest viewing of Chantal Akerman's *La Chambre* (1972)<sup>2</sup>, a 10 minute and 24 second long 360-degree panoramic take of Akerman's flat consisting of her living room, bedroom and kitchen which follows this motion 4 times, before changing direction into a pendulum motion. The only points of motion are the camera itself, and Akerman as she moves around her bed, eyes gazing into the camera's eye, she tests the material reality<sup>3</sup> of her medium. The camera's first stop is a bowl of oranges (possibly satsumas? Tangerines?)<sup>4</sup> on her kitchen table, and my wound of homesickness is revealed. Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*<sup>5</sup> introduces the idea of the Punctum - that which 'wounds'<sup>6</sup>. The premise came to him when gazing at a photograph taken by James Van Der Zee of an African American family (this is not the word he used to describe the family, you can guess what he opted for instead...). He notices the pumps of the woman which resembled his own late mothers. It transported him to his childhood – or rather romantically, transported him back to when his mother was still alive. In a way, Barthes found solace in his grief through these shoes. The Punctum is always an anecdote. Surely, the oranges work in a similar way for me? Barthes' philosophy of the Punctum becomes a device of transience. It unlocks memory, turns a frame into a sensuous experience and transforms something intangible into almost haptic<sup>7</sup>. Barthes states: 'A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me<sup>8</sup>'. This is the only needed definition of the Punctum. It is an emotive

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<sup>2</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 16mm Colour, New York, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Koutsourakis, Angelos., *Modernist Belatedness in Contemporary Slow Cinema*, Screen, Vol. 60(3), 2019, pp. 388.

<sup>4</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:0:16] – [0:0:45].

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, Roland, trans. Richard Howard., *Punctum: Partial Feature in, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2010, pp. 43, para, 19.

[https://monoskop.org/images/c/c5/Barthes\\_Roland\\_Camera\\_Lucida\\_Reflections\\_on\\_Photography.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/c/c5/Barthes_Roland_Camera_Lucida_Reflections_on_Photography.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, Roland, trans. Richard Howard., *Images Chapter In, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Penguin Vintage Classics, 2002. First Published 1977, pp. 133.

<sup>7</sup> McHugh, Kevin E., *Touch at a distance: toward a phenomenology of film*, GeoJournal, Vol. 80, 2015, pp. 840.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, Roland, trans. Richard Howard., *To Recognize in, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2010, pp. 27, para, 10.

physical reaction to a point in the photograph, or in our case, to a frame in *La Chambre*. It is the difference between merely liking something, to something reflective in nature. In my experience, it must take you off guard and be somewhat mundane. It goes without saying that oranges are a common phenomenon. (I am certainly not overcome with homesickness while picking up my groceries), so I ask; why here and why now? To take a closer look at the lone frame as if it were a photograph; the oranges are placed amongst other items on a small round table assumed to be in the kitchen. There are teacups without saucers, apples without a fruit bowl, empty glasses, a teaspoon, and a bowl of something that is difficult to make out due to the 16mm film. This portion of the film is overexposed due to the large window backlighting the table, washing the whole frame in a sea of milky white. The table is slightly messy, but not dirty. It represents a place lived in, as opposed to a set dressed in precision (but still a set non-the-less as I argue later)<sup>9</sup>. I see a home, and by extension my home and the home that my mother created, the oranges are simply a conduit for a larger narrative - Oranges are just oranges until the Punctum wounds. The key for Barthes, is a subjective experience<sup>10</sup>, and in the context of the filmgoer, a quiet one too - even more so in *La Chambre*, which remains completely silent and relying only on the visual to infatuate her viewer. I never watched this film in a cinema, instead watching for the first time in a brightly lit lecture hall during my undergraduate; but the cinema etiquette of the black box remained true<sup>11</sup> and none of us spoke a word, despite the apparency of the Punctum. The wound was hardly a wound back then, as I commuted my way through my undergraduate and lived at

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<sup>9</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:0:26].

<sup>10</sup> Shawcross, Nancy. M., *Time: The Photographic Punctum* Chapter In, *Roland Bathes on Photography: The Tradition in Perspective*, Florida: The University Press of Florida, 1997, pp. 86

<sup>11</sup> Stubblefield, Thomas., *The Black Box and the Techno-Imagination of the Sublime: Flusser, Kant, and Iñárritu's 11'09'01*, n.d, pp. 5

home. The oranges were consistent, but now I live further away, and the oranges do not taste the same if my mother does not put them in her fern shaped fruit bowl. The film goes on and we are in Akerman's bedroom, pivoting on our central axis. A series of reveals occurs when rotating, beyond the oranges is a kettle on a stove, a door left ajar, a chest of drawers, a bed which Akerman lies in, a chair at a writing bureau, and so on<sup>12</sup>. A series of tiny secrets revealed about the woman who inhabits this flat. This process reminds us of film critic Serge Daney and his idea of the secret 'beyond the door'<sup>13</sup> in reference to the Fritz Lang film of the same name<sup>14</sup>. Daney's proposal is an agreement between filmmaker and spectator; that through the duration of the film, something shall be revealed, that there will be catharsis and your precious time shall not be discarded. This unspoken agreement is a juvenile one, much like a promise between a parent and a child that bears the weight of the child's world. Because what are we left with if nothing is revealed and that promise is broken? What is the point of anything at all if we are left with disenchantment? Akerman plays with her spectators in never making such a promise while still appearing to reveal all in a visual list much like a written one. She reveals it again. Then again. And again. Little changes between the first reveal and the last; in Daney's eyes, she does the very thing that disheartens us in an almost cruel way: she wastes our time<sup>15</sup> and reveals instead a darker secret, film as a 'surface without depth'<sup>16</sup>. We do not learn much about her at all beyond how she keeps her home, placing her spectators in liminality between intimacy and distance. It is all superficial and yet deeply connects us to her despite the alienation we feel. The effect is

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<sup>12</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:0:45] – [0:03:12].

<sup>13</sup> Daney, Serge., trans. by Nicholas Elliott, *Footlights (bis)* in, *Footlights*, South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2023, First published 1983, pp. 195.

<sup>14</sup> Lang, Fritz., *Secret Beyond The Door*, Universal Pictures, 4:3, 35mm film, 1947.

<sup>15</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *2007 - 2014 - Telling Time Projects - Chantal Akerman Interview – Filmmaker*, uploaded 2020 <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7yu56h>

<sup>16</sup> Daney, Serge., *Footlights*, 2023, pp. 195.

Brechtian; Akerman separates ‘the elements<sup>17</sup>’ of the house from its true meaning. The Punctum is purely that of our memory, the secret never told. The divulges of her tiny mysteries are only on her terms, fixing us to our axis, doomed only to look around at the fuzzy surface. We do not hear her voice though see her in her bed, we see her oranges though do not know who placed them on the table. Maybe her mother bought them for her too? We create a fabulation<sup>18</sup> to make up for our intrusion in her home, to create a synthesis and, hopefully, shorten the distance between us and her. It is a futile effort on our part. We learn no more about her once the first rotation of the camera is complete, everything inconsequential, we slowly tune away, let down.

Akerman fidgets in her bed in the next rotation, holds an apple that has been sitting on her bedside table in the rotation after, and eats it in the next two rotations<sup>19</sup>. Her eyes do not break away from the camera. I am transported again to my mother (which I realise as I write this might be because of the physical resemblance between my mother and Akerman). Akerman provides us with a performance, a reenactment<sup>20</sup>. My mother does too, when she lays the dining room table at Christmas. Despite my grandfather - and as of a couple years ago, also my grandmother - passing, my mother always sets a full table in the dining room at Christmas. He is absent, yet he always sits at the head of our table. This is my mother’s scene, her performance, and we all oblige because this scene is our scripture. In the case of *La Chambre*, some of that context is missing. Her secrets remain her own, but she shows us an approximation. Her flat is her scene, her in bed

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<sup>17</sup> Brecht, Bertolt., *The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre* in John Willett (ed.) *Brecht on Theatre*, London: Methuen, 1964, First published 1930., pp.33-42.

<sup>18</sup> Hartman, Saidiya., *Venus in Two Acts*, Small Axe, No. 26, Vol. 12(2), Duke University Press, 2008, pp 11. [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/research/centres/blackstudies/venus\\_in\\_two\\_acts.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/research/centres/blackstudies/venus_in_two_acts.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:04:05- 0:09:06].

<sup>20</sup> Agnew, Vanessa, Lamb, Jonathan, Tomann Juliane., *Introduction: What is Reenactment Studies?* In, *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment studies: Key Terms in the Field*, New York: Routledge, 2020, pp. 1-10.

is her performance, recounting her routine and displaying as authentically as possible what she looks like in her flat down to the detail of fresh oranges on the kitchen table. It is a performance of mundanity. A performance of nothing at all except maybe a single point in time. Akerman chooses to focus on the present in *La Chambre*, she uses reenactment as a tool for introspection, which invites us voyeurs to transport ourselves into retrospection through her “props”, they are an inevitable representation of an unknown past. The liminality appears again with the disconnect between her present action and past “props” in a simple line of disconnected communication between Akerman and spectator. The execution of this mundane reenactment is very simple, or at the very least undetectable, which is why I believe the effect is so profound. Akerman allows us an abundance of time and chances to experience<sup>21</sup>. This is not exclusive to Akerman but more so the genre of slow cinema within which she works; characterised by the minimal use of camera, editing, sound and the utilisation of the long take<sup>22</sup>, all of which are present and accounted for in *La Chambre*. That means a response of slow cinema, and *La Chambre*, is this ability to experience (as broad as that is - you tell me your experience as I have been telling mine).

To take a closer look at this phenomenon, let us assess our missing context in movement: Akerman herself. As stated previously, the camera rotates anticlockwise for 4 passes before changing direction into a pendulum motion. The camera, during these rotations reveals Akerman. The first rotation, Akerman merely watches the camera move while rocking her head slowly from side to side against the headboard<sup>23</sup>; the second pass, Akerman lies in her bed facing us, she rocks her whole

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<sup>21</sup>Schwarz, Anja., *Experience*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment studies: Key Terms in the Field*, ed. Agnew, Vanessa, Lamb, Jonathan, Tomann, Juliane, New York: Routledge, 2020, pp. 63-68.

<sup>22</sup>Koepnick, Lutz, *Introduction: Toward a Wonderous Spectator*, in *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 24-31.

<sup>23</sup>Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:01:41- 0:02:01].

body<sup>24</sup>; the third pass, Akerman is sat up rocking an apple in her hands<sup>25</sup>; the camera changes direction; the fourth pass, Akerman is holding the apple to her mouth rocking it, she appears to be licking it<sup>26</sup>; the camera changes direction to the original anticlockwise rotation and Akerman feigns eating the apple<sup>27</sup>; the camera motions the other way again, Akerman is taking visible bites of the apple<sup>28</sup>; the camera switches and Akerman is sat more upright and rubs eyes with her face shielded, she lies back down and the camera pans away<sup>29</sup>. With every passing of the camera, we lose sight of Akerman and only have the previous established context to help us. We do not know what position she is going to be in next because we do not see her transition from one movement to the other, except in the final pass where we get the honour of her in transition of sat up to lying down. These small transitions or processes are lost to off-screen space<sup>30</sup>, we are granted only vignettes of her motion. Her gestus itself are artificial between her never breaking eye contact with the camera and her constant rocking side-to-side, whether that be her whole body or just the “prop” in her hand<sup>31</sup>. In some way, it is a reality abstraction as she allows us to view an internal movement script – her reenactment is just that. A script. The distance from her to us grows larger as we cannot see her move authentically<sup>32</sup>. Viewers are forced to accept Daney is more correct than ever in his ‘cold and disenchanted acknowledgement that there’s nothing.<sup>33</sup>’ Someone ought to give Daney an orange.

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<sup>24</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:04:04- 0:04:24].

<sup>25</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:06:22- 0:06:40].

<sup>26</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:07:16- 0:07:29].

<sup>27</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:07:53- 0:08:09].

<sup>28</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:08:50- 0:09:05].

<sup>29</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *La Chambre*, 1972, [0:09:32- 0:09:50].

<sup>30</sup> Burch, Noël., ‘*Nana, or the Two Kinds of Space*’: *Theory of Film Practice*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1973, First published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 189, April 1967, pp. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Bala, Sruti., *Interruption and Interpellation: Leaving the Theatre in Search of the Theatre*, *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, Oxford University press, 2021, pp 10.

<sup>32</sup> Agnew, Vanessa, Tomann Juliane., *Authenticity*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment studies*, 2020, pp. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Daney, Serge., *Footlights*, 2023, pp. 195.

At this point of the essay, I am curious about Akerman and her archive – or perhaps I am using the archive wrong here, I suppose I mean her story, but then again, the archive is a story. It is a marvel when a filmmaker can connect with an audience so tenderly, especially when so young. At the time of writing this essay, I am 22 years old and have not long moved to Amsterdam from England, and at the time of filming *La Chambre*, Akerman was also 22 years old and had not long moved to New York City from Belgium. No wonder why she refers to her work as ‘sentimental<sup>34</sup>’. *La Chambre* was her first film she made there, with a shoestring budget and limited crew. For this segment, we turn our attention to another film of Akerman’s: *News From Home* (1976)<sup>35</sup>. *News From Home* is the obvious choice in conversation with my mother and the things that link me to her, and as much as I adore this film, there was no Punctum in it for me. *News From Home* is a feature length film composed of a series of static shots of New York City, Akerman reads letters sent to her from Belgium by her mother as a disembodied voice. The film is a dialectic with the visuals and sound having seemingly no relevance to each other when separated, but when put together, creates a similar effect of intimacy and distance as present in *La Chambre*. New York comes across as a cold and unfamiliar place, while the letters from Akerman’s mother brings us home. The entire film runs in this fashion, with outwardly no start and no end. The film, at its crux, is a letter from Akerman back to her mother. In my view, *News From Home* becomes a natural continuation of *La Chambre* as an unofficial sequel. Points of comparison between these two films (at least in a non-formic sense) can be quite difficult. They both employ long takes and an unconventional narrative structure but arise very different emotions to the same

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<sup>34</sup> Indiana, Gary., *Getting Ready For The Golden Eighties: A Conversation With Chantal Akerman*, ArtForum, New York: Features Summer, 1983.

<https://www.artforum.com/features/getting-ready-for-the-golden-eighties-a-conversation-with-chantal-akerman-208022/>

<sup>35</sup> Akerman, Chantal., *News From Home*, 16mm Colour, INA, 1976.



feeling: homesickness. *News From Home* is less subtle in its execution for the reasons I have briefly laid out, *La Chambre* becomes a far more poetic representation. *News From Home* brings us outside and into a crowd; it is daunting and we only have Akerman representing her mother's voice to guide us, in a way it is almost ethereal<sup>36</sup>. *La Chambre* brings us into abstraction, we are aware of our time dedicated to this film (or as it is considered, a visual experiment<sup>37</sup>) and Akerman does not hide, even when she occupies off-screen space, we know that when the camera pans around again, she will be there. In this way, it embodies more (at least for me) my relationship with my own mother and her enduring presence in my life, regardless of spatiality. Letter writing is not a practice I have with her, and I am not on the bustling streets of New York. Most of my time is spent in a bedroom like Akerman's in *La Chambre*, a lot of my fondness of home is spent in quiet contemplation.

In essence, what defines our response to art is hard to articulate. It acts as a sort of 'private language<sup>38</sup>' between us and the artist. Barthes' idea of the Punctum is perhaps the closest we can get when defining why something moves us the way it does. Daney's idea of the secret beyond the door is our journey of discovering our Punctum, reenactment becomes a vehicle of transport through that journey, and the archive encompasses our core. Akerman has a consistency among her films which remains in the thread of them. Akerman does not tell us what *La Chambre* is about, meaning it can be deduced that it is about nothing at all, as filmmaker Robert Bresson says; 'art lies in suggestion<sup>39</sup>'. When we look at how Akerman composes *La*

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<sup>36</sup> Chion, Michael., *The Voice That Seeks a Body* in, *The Voice in Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 144.

<sup>37</sup> Rosenberg, Noah., *Women's Day: 'La Chambre' (1972) by Chantal Akerman*, Ultra Dogma, 2020, <https://ultradogme.com/2020/03/08/la-chambre/>

<sup>38</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig., *Part 1* in, *Philosophical Investigations*, (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 1963), Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1958, pp. 94e, para. 269.

<sup>39</sup> Bresson, Robert., *Words From a Master*, Opus, 2005. [hQps://opus.ing/posts/words-from-a-master](https://opus.ing/posts/words-from-a-master)

*Chambre*, how can we not see her core? The sweeping handheld camera with her friend and cinematographer Babette Mangolte behind it (she also was the cinematographer for *News From Home*), the disordered round table, the used glasses. Akerman's true archive must be sentimentality as she professes, if not that then what else? I want to add a bit of a fabulation here; I suspect homesickness was creeping into Akerman as she was making *La Chambre*, possibly without her overt knowledge, which is why it is so poignant in its stillness. The spectators can feel it, even if she cannot quite yet. *News From Home* is more evident in this sensation, but sometimes we find it hard to talk about such things or oppose the idea of a cruel mirror reflecting our own vulnerability. *La Chambre* only suggests the mirror and offers props to help you get there (if you do at all).

I just got off the phone with my mum, asking her if she wants anything for when I return for the Christmas period (she wants a wedge of Jong Farmhouse Gouda. I am tasked with getting some for her pub friends too). She will, as every Christmas before, lay the full dining table for my Grandfather and Grandmother, she will go to the supermarket the day before my train gets in, and she will buy some oranges. They will be left on my bedside table with the lamp on. She will not say a word about it, because these gestures all mean the same thing...



Illustration by Anna Abotnes.

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