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**TRAVERSING EPISTOLARITY IN CHANTAL  
AKERMAN'S *LES RENDEZ-VOUS D'ANNA* (1978)**

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## **APPROVAL**

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- that this Master of Arts Thesis does not contain any material from any research submitted or accepted to obtain a degree or diploma at another educational institution;
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Gözde Sezgin 03/02/2022

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TRAVERSING EPISTOLARITY IN CHANTAL AKERMAN'S *LES RENDEZ-VOUS*  
*D'ANNA* (1978)

**ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I study the films of the Belgian female director Chantal Akerman, with a focus on her 1978 film, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*. As one of the most influential, avantgarde auteurs in European Cinema, Chantal Akerman uses epistolarity (Naficy 2001) as the basis of her narrative, traversing the past and present through dark transitional spaces such as stations, hotel rooms, in scenes of loneliness and isolation, in the mother-daughter relationship, keeping her Jewish and queer identity as the basis of her film. I use qualitative analysis method and analyse the film based on Hamid Naficy's discussion of epistolarity in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), and other works focusing on the epistolary form (Kauffman 1986) and forms of address (Margulies 1996). Chantal Akerman is doing a mapping of World War II, and she portrays scenes from the traumatic past of Europe and focuses her work on personal stories from the aftermath of World War II. She uses epistolarity as an innovative way in her narrative, which combines the plots through a palimpsestic structure among the characters in the film. The monologues in the film replace the function of letters, while their confessional tone increases the epistolary effect. There are different epistolary media tools in the film and especially the use of telephones and the presence of answering machine within the narration bring this film closer to the telephonic epistles Hamid Naficy mentions (Naficy 2001, 101). The transitional spaces (Naficy 2001) and vehicles existing both in the image and soundtrack layers contribute to the film's exilic and accented character.

**Keywords:** Chantal Akerman, female directors, mother-daughter relationship, queer films, epistolarity.

CHANTAL AKERMAN SİNEMASINDA GEÇİŞLİ MEKTUPSALLIK: *ANNA 'NIN*  
*BULUŞMALAR!* (1978)

## ÖZET

Bu tez çalışmasında Belçikalı kadın yönetmen Chantal Akerman'ın sineması 1978 tarihli filmi *Anna'nın Buluşmaları* üzerinden incelenmektedir. Çalışmada niteliksel analiz yöntemi kullanılmaktadır ve film Hamid Naficy'nin *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001) kitabındaki mektupsallık tartışması ve mektupsallık üzerine diğer çalışmalar (Kauffman 1986, Margulies 1996) temel alınarak analiz edilmektedir. Avrupa Sineması'nın en etkili ve avangard auteurlerinden biri olan Chantal Akerman istasyonlar, otel odaları gibi karanlık geçiş alanları aracılığıyla geçmişi ve bugünü kateden filmde, mektupsallığı (Naficy 2001) anlatı sisteminin temeli olarak kullanmakta; yalnızlık, izolasyon ve anne-kız ilişkisini konu alırken Yahudi ve queer kimliği filminin kökeninde tutmaktadır. Chantal Akerman filmde 2. Dünya Savaşı'nın topografyasını kurar ve Avrupa'nın travmatik geçmişini resmederken savaş sonrasındaki kişisel hikayelere odaklanır. Filmde mektupsallık, karakterler arasındaki olay örgülerini palimpsestik bir yapı olarak birleştiren yenilikçi bir yöntem olarak kullanılmaktadır. Filmdeki monologlar mektup yerine geçmektedir ve monologların itirafa dayalı olması filmin mektupsallık etkisini arttırmaktadır. Filmde farklı mektupsal medya araçları kullanılmaktadır ve anlatımda özellikle telefon kullanımının ve telesekreterin bulunması filmi Hamid Naficy'nin bahsettiği telefonik mektup türündeki filmlere yakınlaştırmaktadır (Naficy 2001, 101). Geçiş mekanları (Naficy 2001) ve vasıtalarının hem görsel hem işitsel varlığı filmin sürgünel ve aksanlı karakterine katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Chantal Akerman, kadın yönetmenler, anne-kız ilişkisi, kuir film, mektupsallık.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

**Intensely personal but always distanced, blurring the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, obsessed with borders and liminal spaces, her cinema is characteristically *entre deux* (in-between). (Schmid 2010, 2)**

In this study, I would like to analyse the experimental and challenging cinema of pioneering Belgian film director, screenwriter, theorist, and artist Chantal Akerman, and discuss her 1978 film, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* within the context of “epistolarity” referring mainly to Hamid Naficy’s theories in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), in addition to other studies that look at the epistolary form (Kauffman 1986, Margulies 1996). During this study, I will use a qualitative research method, and the main film theories that will form my thesis’ theoretical background will be formalism and feminist theory.

In this chapter, I will provide a short biography of Akerman and examine her *oeuvre* in general. In the second chapter, after a literature review of Akerman’s cinema, I will focus on five Akerman films from her early work, as they are the leading works that make her cinema unique both formally and thematically. In the third chapter, I will analyse *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, and argue that this accented film has characteristics of the epistolary film for three main reasons. First, I believe that epistolarity, “of, relation to, or suitable to a letter”, “contained in or by carried on by letters”, “written in the form of series of letters” (“epistolary”), is an absolutely crucial device for this film since the film is based on telling stories rather than showing them. In this sense, I claim that the encounters and monologues in the film act like confessional, verbal letters which reflect personal and historical stories. (Indeed, the word “epistle” etymologically means both “a formal or elegant letter” and also “liturgical lection usually from one of the New Testament Epistles” (“epistle”), and when Akerman’s Jewish identity is considered, her interest in the form is even more understandable). Secondly, the film already involves such epistolary media tools as the telephone and answering machine; and finally, because it presents the communication inhibitions that epistolary forms have, as well.

There are various reasons that led me to work on the cinema of Chantal Akerman. First, I believe that her cinema is very idiosyncratic and influential as she subverts the temporal and spatial conventions of conventional cinema. Her innovative filmmaking style and shooting techniques - static camera angles, long takes, frontal compositions, subversion of temporospatial

compatibility, voice-over narrations, long silences - and her antiillusionist style make her cinema highly experimental and impressive. Besides, in her works she mostly centres on underrepresented people such as housewives, exiles, queer people, ethnic minorities, namely those unheralded characters that traditional cinema mostly chooses not to prioritise. Also, she is a real cinema labourer who is generally director, scriptwriter and producer of her films, and also really avant-garde in both her private and professional life. Yet, despite all these significant qualities of her cinema, I think that her works are not very well known by most spectators. The main reason for this is that her films demand a much more engaged position from viewers as she mostly uses real time and exhibits the quotidian in detail in her films. In relation to that, Akerman herself says that . . .Time flies in a lot of movies.. .It's supposed to be a good movie. All you have in life is time. In my film, you feel every second passing by your body" (Beck and Ferreira 2010). Indeed, compared to mainstream cinema, it can be said that Akerman films are almost "anti spectator". Even compared to the French New Wave directors that influenced her cinema, for example Jean Luc Godard and the avant-garde films of that era, Akerman's works are much more slow, silent and experimental. For all these reasons, I believe that an *auteur* like Akerman should be examined by many more researchers, there should be much more information published about her art, and I would like to contribute to the studies about her with this thesis.

What is more, Akerman's nomadic character had a high impact on her films and this specific feature, her rootlessness, spurred my interest in her cinema, along with her works' many other precious aspects. She had two extended stays in New York in the 70s, hence she had already experienced being distant from her home country at an early age. She was a nomad throughout her life, travelling from New York to Israel and from South America to post-communist Eastern Europe. She herself articulates this in this way: "I do not have the notion of land, on the contrary I feel that I am only attached to the land under my feet" (quoted by Schmid 2010, 12). Thus displacement, journey, alienation are the common themes of her many films, and she frequently depicts transitional spaces such as train stations and hotels, which can be referred to as the key components of Naficy's accented cinema (Naficy 2001).

After watching Akerman films, I decided to analyse *LesRendez-vous d'Anna* specifically, because this film is one of her best works that reflect her exilic and wandering character, mentioned above, and the film is a combination of her favourite themes - loneliness, journey, sexual identities, exile, mother-daughter relationships and Jewishness - that she had centered on

in her former, remarkable works in the 70s. On the other hand, though the film is more narrative oriented compared to those works, it is still very stylised, and it carries the characteristics of the avant-garde film form. From this aspect, the film “paves the way” for her future works in the 80s, as Marion Schmid also points out (Schmid 2010, 58). Besides, in one of her articles, she refers to *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* and claims that Akerman “textualizes speech” (Schmid 2013, 78) and this approach became a starting point for me when establishing my arguments. These characteristics of the film made me especially interested in it, but I also added Naficy’s theories about the epistolary form in accented films to my thesis, and especially focused on this subject, because the film that I am analysing mostly takes place in transitional spaces and transmits the stories of an accented cinema, a nomadic and woman filmmaker, an exilic person. In the film, Akerman traverses cities that link the past and present of Europe through epistolarity.

In her article “Outside In: ‘Accented Cinema’ at Large” (Suner 2006), Asuman Suner acknowledges the importance of Naficy’s theories on accented cinema, which is described as those films that have been made in the West by postcolonial/ethnic directors starting from the 1960s. However, as a counter argument to Naficy’s theory which makes the connection between displacement and accented cinema, she claims that the styles and themes associated with exilic/diasporic films are found in a large number of contemporary “world” films, which are considered “national cinemas”, and she asserts that unless the relationship between exilic and national filmmaking and national cinema is made clear, the concept of “accented cinema” will not be able to reach its critical potential (Suner 2006, 363-364). Although I agree with her arguments, in this thesis I will adhere to Naficy’s theories as this film has a certain framework in terms of themes, formal structure, and the identity of its director; and I specifically look here at the epistolary form.

Akerman’s films are profoundly influenced by her background, hence they are very realist in a sense, and this also enhanced my motivation for studying her films. Her multilayered biography, which contains a lot of notable points such as her feminist, queer and Jewish identities and her close relationship with her mother, largely influenced her thematic choices and enriched her art. *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is both a road film and a woman filmmaker’s identity journey at the same time, and it carries traces of Akerman’s own autobiography. During my study, I would like to look at these analogies between her personal life and her works, and while elaborating on these self-reflexive parts within the narrative, in order to understand Chantal Akerman’s presence as a

feminist filmmaker and the ontological structure in her films, I will also apply the theories of feminist film theorists (Irigaray 1981, Hirsch 1981, Longfellow 1989) when needed.

Indeed, Akerman is a very provocative feminist filmmaker. Her perception of life and the world is strongly rebellious and challenging, and her cinema is quite reckless on many matters, especially about the position of women in daily life. Besides, she generally worked with a totally female crew when making her films. However, she did not describe herself as a “feminist” filmmaker and she was against such categorisation and reductionism. Akerman expresses her thoughts regarding this issue in these words: “I think it is poor and limiting to think of my films as simply feminist.. I won’t say that I’m a feminist filmmaker. I’m not making women’s films. I’m making Chantal Akerman films” (quoted by Margulies 1996, 12). In any case, her works are undoubtedly very significant pieces which can be considered as exemplars of the feminist manifesto since she depicts women’s alienation, isolation, loneliness, and confinement in her films in very radical and stimulating ways and her works essentially promote the freedom of women. At this point, I should also remark that, similar to her resistance against categorisation of her films and labeling them as “feminist films”, she did not accept the labelling of her films as “LGBTQ films”, either. However, lesbian relationships and queer themes constitute a noticeable part of Akerman’s films. As another autobiographical parallelism between her life and works, she openly exhibited her relationship with cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton through documentaries, and displayed lesbian affairs in her fictions like *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* (1974).

The filmmaker directed more than forty films throughout her career, including several documentaries and more than fifteen video installation works. Her productivity and the variety of her works make her not only an impressive director, but also a multidimensional artist, who expanded her art by writing autobiographical books as well. Akerman’s career could be seen partially as a reflection of her life. She was born in Brussels, the daughter of a Polish Jewish mother who had survived Auschwitz. Akerman and her mother were very close to each other, and this intimate relationship is a crucial theme in her films, also being the subject of one of her books, *Ma mère rit* (2013). Akerman’s mother suffered from an anxiety disorder throughout her life, and yet Akerman’s character, and her perception of life and the world were all affected and shaped by both this intimacy and her mother’s health problems. Also, Akerman’s mother’s silence about her Holocaust past, and the inadequate story transmission from one generation to the next, caused her to “invent false memories” to fill in the gaps in her family's past (Bergstrom

1999, 94-116). This traumatic history of her family affected her conception of the world deeply, and it is no coincidence that the dominant themes of the numerous Akerman films are genocide, displacement, isolation, loneliness, the death drive, hysteria, melancholy and suicide.

Her career seems to have also been affected by several impacts and influences of others upon her like that of Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). After watching this film when she was 18 years old, in 1968, she directed *Saute ma ville*, a short film about a young girl in a small kitchen who eventually blows up both the kitchen and herself. As she began making this short film, she dropped out of her education at the Belgian film school INSAS (Institut Supérieur des Arts). In 1971, she moved from Belgium to New York and here, the structural and minimalist works of the experimental filmmakers like Michael Snow, Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas and Robert Bresson inspired her very much. Especially the experimental and non-narrative works of Snow like *Wavelength* (1967) and *Back and Forth* (1969) had a great impact on Akerman's filmmaking style. Moreover, Akerman states that, after she watched *Back and Forth*, she realised that this kind of film can make a viewer "as tense as a Hitchcock film, with a story or not" (Beck and Ferreira 2010).

Whilst the avant-garde and structural New York art movement influenced her experimental filmmaking, the political environment of the era, the revolutionary atmosphere of the 60s and feminist movement in the 70s, explicitly affected her filmmaking as well. Indeed, she allocated a particular sphere to women characters in her films and projected them in very distinctive and unusual ways. As I will discuss when I am analysing the *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, Akerman manifested women characters in her films from a different perspective compared to classical narrative cinema. In her striking article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey describes the image of woman in the traditional narrative films as:

**In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 1975, 11)**

On the contrary, Akerman's film style and the representation of women in her films function contrary to mainstream films' strategies to attract male spectators, as Laura Mulvey discusses in her work. Akerman's representation of the female body or lesbian relationships in her films is far away from attracting the male spectator or the female spectators who look at the image of woman

with a “male” gaze (Mulvey 1981, 12-15). This feeling of possession is destroyed by Akerman. On the other hand, whilst Mulvey asserts that both male and female spectators identify themselves largely with the male protagonist and take pleasure in watching the woman in the spectacle voyeuristically, in “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator” (1982) Mary Ann Doane approaches the position of the female spectator from a different perspective. Instead of Mulvey’s active male look and passive female dichotomy, she focuses on the “opposition between proximity and distance in relation to the image” (Doane 1982, 77). First she explains the reasons why female spectatorship is seen as problematical, in words that define the woman spectator as “too close to herself, entangled in her own enigma, she could not step back, could not achieve the necessary distance of a second look” (Doane 1982, 76) and says that the dominance of women on the screen creates a narcissistic sense for the female spectator that as she is so close to the spectacle, “she is the image” (Doane 1982, 78). Then she refers to Luce Irigaray’s theory which claims that the sense of possession is impossible for a woman as she is too close to herself, and she is pleased with this closeness. Irigaray expresses her argument in these words:

**Ownership and property are doubtless quite foreign to the feminine. At least sexually. But not nearness. Nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible. Woman derives pleasure from what is so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself. (Irigaray 1985, 31)**

In Akerman films, her formal choices and the way she uses the body - avoiding close-ups or a fragmented depiction of the female body - make a voyeuristic gaze for the male spectator impossible. The women characters in her films are depicted within their pure, solid, realist circumstances rather than being presented as erotic or dominant figures that go beyond the narrative. With regards to the female spectators, they may experience pleasure derived from a sense of closeness with the woman character in the screen as Irigaray points out, rather than looking at the spectacle possessively.

Though Akerman’s films include a lot of themes intertwined with each other, I will try to group Akerman’s filmography and synopses of her films under certain categories. The first of these categories can be those films in which she focuses on themes such as isolation, alienation of women and women's oppression. One of the exemplars of these works is her masterpiece, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* (1975). The film depicts the monotonous daily

routine of a domestic housewife by using real time and revolutionary shooting techniques such as using a static camera, having few dialogues and shooting at a low angle. Akerman directed her black and white, fiction film, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, in 1974, a year before she made *Jeanne Dielman*. The film is about the confinement of a young woman, Julie - Akerman herself - who is alone in a room, constantly moves her furniture about, tries to write letters but fails, and eats powdered sugar repeatedly. This experimental film, which is more a bodily and gestural performance (Deleuze 1989, 196), has an episodic narrative. At one point, Julie leaves her room, hitchhikes and meets a male truck driver with whom she eats and drinks. Finally, the last part of the film depicts her sexual relationship with her ex-girlfriend. Her last film in the 1970s, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is the story of a wandering woman filmmaker and is the film that I will analyse in detail within my thesis study. The film “articulates the mix of curiosity and defamiliarisation for a nation (Germany), on the part of a transnational individual (a wandering Jewish woman) in all its intricate, postHolocaust reverberations” (Margulies 1999, 62). In the film, Aurore Clément plays the leading role, and the film contains multiple themes such as loneliness on journeys, mother-daughter relationship, lesbian affair and existential malaise. Also, transitional spaces occupy an important place within the film, and I will examine these transitional spaces in my work.

The mother-daughter relationship is also another very significant theme in both Akerman’s life and her works, as indicated before. She made fiction films and documentaries that present autobiographical components derived from this relationship, and in her works, she drew on her observations of her mother’s life, as she herself clearly states during interviews. For *Jeanne Dielman*, she says that “this is a love film to my mother” (Kinder 1977, 3). On the other hand, Akerman and her mother's relationship is not a simple, single-layered and easily perceived kind of a mother-daughter relationship. Instead, it includes both intimacy and Akerman’s desire to be herself and autonomous too. Her 1976 highly experimental documentary *News from Home* is one of her most avant-garde films, and it exhibits Akerman’s mother’s attachment to her daughter along with the physical distance between them and the detachedness of the daughter from the mother during her New York years. In the film, which consists of long takes of various locations in New York City, the camera doesn’t show Akerman; her voice-over reads letters that her mother sent her during her stay in New York from 1971 to 1973. In his book, Naficy discusses this film in the context of epistolarity due to the wide use of the letters in the film as

written by the mother to her daughter in exile (Naficy 2001, 129). This extraordinary documentary film is an experimental trip in the New York streets, subways and various other places. *L'Enfant aimé ou Je joue à être une femme mariée* (1971) is another Akerman film about a young mother and her daughter and Akerman stars in the film as herself. *No Home Movie* (2015), both the final documentary and final film of her career, focuses on conversations between the filmmaker and her mother just a few months before her mother's death. Throughout the documentary, viewers follow Akerman's mother's life in Belgium closely and become the witnesses of this intimate relationship between the mother and her daughter.

It can be said that among the other most prevalent themes in Akerman's filmography are political themes such as the Holocaust, immigration, racism and war. One of these films is *Dis-moi* (1980), a documentary for French television. In the film, Akerman interviews her mother and other elderly women that survived the Holocaust. *Golden Eighties* (1986) "signals an intermittent crossover from alternative modes of production to the mainstream" (Schmid 2010, 78) and is a romantic musical but it is also about the war and the Holocaust as well. *Histoires d'Amérique: Food, Family and Philosophy* (1989) is another film centered on the stories of Jewish immigrants in the United States. Akerman directed a short segment of *Contre l'Oubli* (Akerman, Allio, Amar et al. 1991), a collective film about the murder of Salvadorean activist Febe Elisabeth Velásquez. In 1993, she made *D'Est*, a documentary film in which Akerman "maps image of today's Eastern Europe onto the memories of a prior time, using the camera as a peripatetic time machine" (Lebow 2008, 2). Her 1999 documentary, *Sud* examines the effect of the death of James Byrd Jr - an African American who was murdered by whites in 1998 in Texas. In 2002, she directed the documentary *De l'Autre Côté*, which looks at the Mexicans who cross the border into the United States. Akerman herself was one of the cinematographers of the film. In 2006, she made *Là-bas*, a documentary film shot in Israel "where stasis replaces movement, space replaces character, and interior replaces the sweep of landscape" (Flitterman-Lewis 2019a, 13) and depicts a month's observations from the interior of Akerman's apartment in Tel Aviv, as she considers and explores the meaning of her Jewish identity.

Akerman's politically themed documentaries such as *D'Est*, *Sud* and *Là-bas* can be seen as a result of her considerable interest in making documentaries, since this is like a "quasi-archeological process" (Schmid 2010, 9) that enables her to explore her past and build a bridge between the past and today. Furthermore, she has made many other documentaries on various

themes, and she admits her tendency to make documentaries explicitly when an interviewer asks her about her thoughts on making them: “. . .With least material, I feel better. You get more concentrated, much more pleasure” (Beck and Ferreira 2010). When she was at the beginning of her career, she shot her highly structural and experimental first feature film *Hotel Monterey* (1972), which is a silent documentary that portrays a cheap New York hotel and its lonely old guests. In the film, Akerman shoots the hallways, elevators, doors, windows and guests of the hotel with her insistent long takes. She made documentaries mirroring her own career and life too. A TV short *Lettre d'une Cinéaste: Chantal Akerman* (1984), and *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1996), a selfportrait of her life and career, are among these films. For an artist who was interested in various branches of the arts, Akerman also had a special interest in music, thus music is the basic theme of some of her documentaries like *Les Trois dernières sonates de Franz Schubert* (1989). Besides, she also documented the lives of choreographers and *Un jour Pina a demandé* (1983) is one of these works, about German dancer Pina Bausch. Also, she made three other music related documentaries starring her partner, the cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton. One of them is the 1989 short, *Trois strophes sur le nom de Sacher*, a second one is *Avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton* (2002) - a TV short in which Wieder-Atherton talks about herself and her musical journey - and finally, in 2009 she directed *A l'Est avec Sonia Wieder-Atherton*.

Together with the wide range of works mentioned above, Akerman directed many other shorts, dramas, musicals, and comedies along her cinematic path. In 1972, she made *La Chambre I*, an experimental short that presents a 360° panoramic shot of her bedroom. The 11-minute-long film is also the first film that Akerman made in New York, and its director of photography was Babette Mangolte, a challenging French cinematographer whom Akerman worked with on her various projects. *Le 15/8* (1973), co-directed with Samy Szlingerbaum, is another Akerman short about a young, bored Finnish girl in an apartment in Paris. *Toute une nuit* (1982) is an Akerman drama which follows different lovers during a night in Brussels, and it is Akerman's "homecoming" film "since it lies as a resting point in between her various wanderings" (Fowler 1999, 79). Akerman shot many other musical dramas and shorts like *Les Années 80* (1983) which presents the making of a musical, *L'Homme à la valise* (1983) a television drama in which Akerman plays the leading role and locks herself into her home for 28 days similarly to the Julie in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*.

Her *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* (1984) is a black and white, short film about two teenage girls fleeing from Brussels to Paris and attempting to survive there. Akerman uses humorous language in the film as she accelerates the story in a parodic way. In 1986, she made *La Paresse*, a short film on sloth, starring Akerman and Sonia Wieder-Atherton and *Letters Home* (1986), a drama about the intimate correspondence between Sylvia Plath and her mother.

A Parisian fairy tale (Vincendeau 1999, 117-131) *Nuit et Jour* (1991) is another Akerman drama about a love triangle in Paris. In 1992, she made *Le Déménagement*, a film for television, starring French actor Sami Frey, and it is about the difficulty of making choices, and consists of Frey's monologues. In 1994, she directed a comedy drama named *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*, a haunting and lovely portrayal of female adolescence and its malaises such as passion, grief and the tumultuous period while passing from girlhood to womanhood (Mayne 1999, 150). The film also contains LGBTQ themes. It is a haunting and beautiful depiction of female adolescence and its problems such as desire and grief. In 1996, she directed *Un divan à New York*, a romantic comedy, starring Juliette Binoche and William Hurt and it was co-written by French actor, screenwriter and director Jean-Louis Benoît; and in 2004, she directed *Demain on déménage*, a musical comedy about a character named Charlotte (Sylvie Testud), who tries to write erotic books. In another short, *Tombée de nuit sur Shanghai* (2007), Akerman uses real time and her static camera while showing the skyscrapers in Shanghai, from a floating boat.

Even if precise classification is difficult for Akerman films, as stated formerly, the last category in Akerman filmography can cover her novel adaptations. This is not surprising for her cinema, in view of her strong ties with literature. Indeed, her quotations from Kafka, Baldwin and Proust in her book *Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait en cinéaste* (2004) can also give evidence of her close relationship with philosophy and literature. (In *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*, the young girl quotes from Kierkegaard and says that she likes these kinds of books about incommunicability). Akerman directed *La Captive* (2000), an adaptation of French novelist Marcel Proust's novel *La Prisonnière: A la recherche du temps perdu* (1923). The film mainly centres on the themes of love and obsession. In 2011, she directed *La Folie Almayer*, the last fictional film she directed in her career and an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River* (1895), which is another story of obsession, about Malaysian trader Kaspar Almayer's excessive attachment to his daughter.

Though Akerman's *oeuvre* is very wide and rich in terms of both themes and genres, as has been seen, and all her works are precious in their own right, I believe that her groundbreaking cinema's most impressive and provocative pieces, especially in terms of the depiction of women's alienation, loneliness and isolation, are the films she made in the 70s. These are the main films that manifest her authentic shooting techniques, and they inscribe her as a unique *auteur* in the cinema history. Hence, I will give further information about her signature films of the 70s in Chapter 2, before I start analysing *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* in Chapter 3.

The 1980s were also very productive years for Akerman and compared to her very structural and experimental and less narrative oriented films in the 70s, a shift can be noticed in her filmography in terms of genres and themes in her works in the 80s. For example, she started producing musicals in the 80s and this was new to her cinema. Also, she increased the number of her documentaries and she started to document artists including American poet, novelist and short story writer Sylvia Plath, choreographer Pina Bausch, and some musicians including her partner, cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton. Also, in the 80s she started making fiction films and documentaries directly related to Jewish immigrants.

When we come to the 1990s, political issues continued to be an essential and inseparable part of Akerman cinema. In addition to the issues regarding Jewish people and the Holocaust trauma of the Jewish community, she also engaged in producing films on other ethnic minorities and underprivileged groups. In the 2000s, in the last 15 years of her life, she continued to make films in diverse genres, including documentaries, comedies and dramas. As indicated above, due to her close interest in literature, she adapted novels into film in this period. Besides, all kinds of issues related to human psyche like obsession, jealousy, and desire were also part of her cinema and constituted the main contents of her films. In *Chantal Akerman, de Ca*, when she talks about the Proust book and her film *La Captive*, she says "There are many many more interesting things in the book but I chose that theme of jealousy, I took all the rest out. I had the heart of it, for me..." (Beck and Ferreira, 2010). Beyond a doubt, Akerman's interest in psychological issues enriched her cinema further.

Following this general overview of Akerman's filmography, in the next chapter, I would like to look at the cinema of Akerman from a closer perspective by discussing her 1968 short film *Saute ma ville* and four feature films from the 1970s. I believe that this closer look will be useful in

terms of understanding her authentic formal and thematic strategies.

## **2. THE CINEMA OF CHANTAL AKERMAN**

There is a wide range of academic literature including entire books, book chapters and articles on Chantal Akerman's cinema. When we look at the dates of these academic works, some of them were published in the 90s, but most of them were written in the last two decades. In this sense, it is possible to say that her cinema has started to be taken into consideration and more fully discussed recently. I think the increasing number of private movie screenings and independent film festivals in recent years, along with new technological developments and globalisation, the possibility of gaining knowledge about many valuable avant-garde artists through online sources, and also the emergence of online film platforms, have enabled audiences to reach her works which were once distributed in limited countries and movie houses, and this has increased her recognition. Thus, her more subtle work started to be explored by more cinephiles and this has affected the volume of academic research as well.

Recent works have approached her cinema from varied perspectives and centred on her feminist /Jewish/ exilic and nomadic identity, the formal strategies she uses in her films (use of sound/image, time/space) along with the main themes in her films - alienation, repression, trauma, travel, isolation, loneliness, displacement. Before I look more closely at some of Akerman's early films in this chapter, first I would like to mention the main studies on Akerman and epistolary related works, which will form the bulk of this thesis study.

Ivone Margulies' significant book on Akerman, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (1996) is the earliest comprehensive study on Akerman, and in this book Margulies details Akerman's hyperrealist style and her interest in the everyday, by looking at her works such as *Saute ma ville*, *Jeanne Dielman*, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, *Toute une nuit* and the other films that Akerman made up until the mid 90s. In her book, she explores Akerman's hyperrealist style and her interest in the everyday. For my work, the chapter "Forms of Address: Epistolary Performance, Monologue, and Bla Bla Bla" (Margulies 1996, 149-170) is especially useful because in this chapter Margulies looks at *News from Home* from the epistolary perspective, while also looking at the distribution of sound and silence between the characters of her films and the monologue styled speeches and "talk-blocks" in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (Margulies 1996, 154-161).

One of the most important essay collections dealing with Akerman's cinema is *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman* (Foster 1999) and I will refer to this source throughout my thesis. This book, edited by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, is composed of the essays of ten scholars and each scholar scrutinises Akerman's films through themes such as identity, the mother-daughter relationship, lesbian affairs, Jewish identity. In one of these articles, "Echo and Voice in Meetings with Anna" (Margulies 1999, 59-76) Ivone Margulies focuses on *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* once more, and looks at the film from multiple aspects, such as the way Akerman's Jewish identity is reflected in the film, and the way Akerman uses dialogues, monologues and sound in the film. Two more essays, "Personal Pronouncements in I. .You...He...She and Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels" (Turim 1999) and "Invented Memories" (Bergstrom 1999) in the same edited book, are the other works I will draw on during my thesis.

There are also studies that examine Akerman's relationship with war and specifically her memories of the war. In "Two Women Filmmakers Remember the Dark Years" (Higgins 1999), Lynn A. Higgins focuses on Diane Kurys's *Entre Nous* (1983) and Akerman's *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* and *Golden Eighties*, since both two filmmakers were children of the post-war, both use autobiographical elements in their films, and they render war by using their own memories, particularly of their mothers. This work is also substantially important for my study, because Higgins looks at the subliminal effects of World War II on the characters in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, making references to the Holocaust period.

In addition to these studies focusing on Akerman's relation with war and the Holocaust, Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporing Filmmaking* (2001), is a broader focus on exilic and diasporic filmmakers living in the West who produce accented films, in Naficy's own words. In his work, he regards Akerman as an accented filmmaker, and in the chapter named "Epistolarity and Epistolary Narratives" (Naficy 2001, 101-151) he approaches Akerman's *News from Home* and *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* within the context of the epistolary form, referring to the ways that Akerman uses both letters and the theme of exile in these films. During my study, I will draw on this book extensively, as stated in the Introduction. "Outside In: 'Accented Cinema' at Large" (Suner 2006) is another study on "accented cinema" which opposes Naficy's theories that only associate accented cinema with the postcolonial/ethnic directors, and she claims that the styles and themes associated with exilic/diasporic films are also found in a large number of contemporary "world" films which are considered "national cinemas" (Suner 2006, 363-364).

Even though I agree with her thoughts, I will refer to Naficy's arguments in this study while establishing a relationship between epistolary, exilic directors and transitional spaces.

As we come to the mid 2000s, in *First Person Jewish* (Lebow 2008), Alisa S. Lebow examines films made by Jewish artists including Akerman, to discover how the Jewish identity of these filmmakers create a desire to look at their inner worlds in their work. She discusses Akerman's *D'Est* in detail and analyses how Akerman's past and her mother's roots affected both the film's narrative and its narration.

Marion Schmid's book, *Chantal Akerman* (2010), is also one of the key sources within the literature on Akerman's cinema, and I will refer to this source during my analyses. Her book examines Akerman's cinema in depth, with reference to the 1970s avant-garde art in America. The book emphasises Akerman's exilic and diasporic identities, and the way she represents marginal groups, and similar to Lebow, pays specific attention to the way that Akerman uses themes such as the Holocaust and Jewishness in her films. As can be seen, her Jewish identity has become the subject or main theme of many works about her cinema.

When we look at the most recent studies about Akerman's cinema, we find the following: *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives* (Schmid and Wilson 2019), a collection of essays that review Akerman's later work and the article "Ephemeral, Elusive, Impossible: Chantal Akerman and the Concept of 'Home'" (Flitterman-Lewis 2019b) examines how Akerman used the theme of home in her films along with other themes such as nomadism, borders, exile, rootlessness, marginality and displacement, as I will discuss in my thesis in detail too.

One of the most recent works which associates Akerman's films with the concept of epistolary is an article named "Women's Epistolary Cinema. Exploring Female Alterities: Epistolary Films and Epistolary Essay Films" (Ibáñez 2021). In her article, Ibáñez analyses female authorship in contemporary epistolary cinema. She claims that Akerman started the epistolary film genre with *News from Home*, and together with Varda's *L'une chante, l'autre pas* (1977) and Duras' *Aurélia Steiner* (1979), these three films originated the strong relationship between female authorship and epistolary cinema (Ibáñez 2021, 2). Ibáñez's arguments and the way she combines epistolary and intimate female bounds, coincide with my arguments. Though there is no wide use of actual correspondence in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*

compared to *News from Home*, I believe that both the epistolary media tools in the film and the moment of confession during the mother-daughter encounter are used as the instruments that link the women to each other, or, more precisely, they are used with this intent, even though the attempts at communication generally fail during the film, as will be discussed further.

Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (2007) is another study to be drawn on when I am presenting my ideas about the way Akerman uses the themes of journey, female nomadism, and passages in her films, and how she builds a "geometry of passage" that "allows a woman to be in her own space and in the space of her voyage" (Bruno 2007, 101). On the other hand, for theorising the gestural performances in Akerman films, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Deleuze 1989, 196-198) will be the main point of reference.

When examining epistolary related literature, Janet Gurkin Altman's book *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982) is the first comprehensive work that elaborates on epistolary fictions. Linda S. Kauffman's *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (1986) is another significant source that will be utilised in this thesis, and it looks at the characteristics of the amorous epistolaries, starting from Ovid's *Heroides* and continuing with contemporary epistolary novels. This study is important for this research, in order to understand the desire that leads someone to write letters to an addressee that is mostly unreachable or lost. *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (Taylor 2008) is another essential source for this research, as the film to be analysed is established on the confessions of five interlocutors and the main character, and while arguing that the film is epistolary, I support this argument by implying that there is a relationship between the confessions and letters. The book looks at the nature of confessions referring to the psychoanalytical processes between the patient and the analyst. In *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* this kind of relationship can also be seen, as will be discussed later.

In terms of feminist studies, Brenda Longfellow's "Love Letters to the Mother" (1989) is a useful work to enable an understanding of the close relationship between Akerman and her mother and how Akerman reflects this closeness to her art. Similarly Marianne Hirsch's "Mothers and Daughters" (1981) which draws together the different psychoanalytical trends towards the mother-daughter relationship, and Luce Irigaray's "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other" (1981), a lyrical text and an address from a daughter to her mother, are other

significant sources in order to make understandable the dynamics of the intimate mother-daughter bond.

Finally, Schmid's article "Between Literature and the Moving Image: The Cinematography of Chantal Akerman" (2013) is a source that provides a basis for my thesis arguments. She touches on Akerman's wish to be a writer until she watches *Pierrot le Fou* (Schmid 2013, 74) and manifests how filmmaking and literature were interwoven in Akerman's career by giving references to Akerman's *auteur* style. She also claims that with the publication of the scripts of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* and *Un divan a New York*, Akerman offered a "literary status on texts" (Schmid 2013, 75), and referring to the characteristics of the speeches and distribution of the utterances in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, she asserts that it is a film in which Akerman converts the verbal to the literary (Schmid 2013, 78).

Though there are also many other significant works on Akerman and epistolarity, the sources sorted above are the main ones that will structure this thesis study. In order to understand the cinema of Akerman, her formal choices and the way she uses dialogues and speeches, I will mostly use Schmid's and Margulies' books and when discussing the epistolarity in the accented and exilic film, Hamid Naficy's book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* will be the major source that will support the thesis. In addition to these main sources, literature on epistolarity and citations from some feminist scholars will bolster my arguments while evaluating the film at large.

## **2.1 Akerman's Films in the 1970s**

As specified in the Introduction, before examining *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* in detail in Chapter 3, I would like to zoom in on Akerman's early films, in order to understand her distinctive style better. As underlined before, Akerman's filmography is undoubtedly full of many precious works, however, to be able to understand her cinema's minimalist and experimental qualities, I believe that we should look at her works in the 1970s, the time when her films bear the traces of the American avant-garde and performance art, thus they are much more structural and experimental compared to her later works; hence they reflect Akerman's specific filmmaking style more deeply. These works concentrate on themes such as isolation, displacement, alienation, mother-daughter relationships and some of them also contain elements of the epistolary form.

### 2.1.1 *Saute ma ville*

Towards the beginning of the 1970s, 18-year-old Chantal Akerman, who was on a shoestring budget for filmmaking, shot her first film, *Saute ma ville* in 1968. This black and white short film was shot in Brussels, and it is one of Akerman's most challenging works and a forerunner of her provocative style that would be more apparent as her career advanced. In this short, parody-like, burlesque film, Akerman herself plays an adolescent girl, which is confined to a kitchen, cooking spaghetti, eating it alone, cleaning the kitchen, shining her shoes, dancing, and finally blowing herself up in the kitchen at the end of the film.

The film starts with the gloomy atmosphere of the world outside, and images of grey apartments, and after that we see a young girl in the frame, she enters an apartment with some flowers in her hand, and she checks her letterbox first. While she is climbing up the stairs quickly, she disturbingly hums a melody and, in the meantime, the camera shows the lift going up and down. Just after the dizzying moments of these first minutes, we see her entering her kitchen, as the camera presents no other parts of the apartment building to the viewers. In the kitchen, there is a small table which is leaning against the wall and a chair, on the kitchen bench there is a radio and there is a pot on the stove. Both the balloon in front of the kitchen window and the Smurf image attached to the kitchen door, mirror the clash between the womanhood which is confined to the domestic sphere and housework; and joyfulness and freedom derived from the nature of adolescence. As we hear her desynchronised humming voice, she turns on the stove, opens a can, and starts cooking her pasta. Then, she tapes up the kitchen door, eats her food and drinks wine in an accelerated and lusty way, she "acts like" she is happy, and during these moments the continuous humming voice which is out of tune with her image, and the mannered way she laughs right afterwards, creates a sense of unrest and hints at repressed emotions, her rising sense of distress. Next, she starts some performative acting: she puts on a jacket and scarf and mimics a housewife while she is cleaning the floor, shining her shoes - in fact, messing everywhere up rather than cleaning - and after that she acts like an entranced woman singing and laughing hysterically. As Margulies says, "order and chaos coexist as strobic intermittencies in a jerky kind of performance" (Margulies 1996, 1) throughout these moments, and also the comic and exaggerated activities and erratic gestures of the girl are presented as signs of a "psychic implosion" (Schmid 2010, 19). The unusual shooting techniques in the tiny kitchen and the way camera stays fixed or moves shakily or zooms in on the young girl's actions,

or to the messy floor, all together contribute to the irritating, claustrophobic mise-en-scene of the film and further increase the signs of disorder further. Additionally, the dull, cheerless, black and white lighting of the film increases the sense of gloom and desolation.

With these performative, theatrical gestures, Akerman is referring to the domestic duties of a traditional housewife who is incarcerated in the kitchen and home but, still, expects to be happy and contented. And as indicated above, she dissociates the body of the girl from the noises she makes, the girl's humming sounds being quite loud and disturbing with ups and downs, and Akerman shrewdly uses this formal strategy as a tool that suggests the girl's unbalanced psychological situation, her self-loathing and selfaggression, which ends in her suicidal action. This act of disturbance also directly bears witness to Akerman's painful Jewish past. In her article, "Invented Memories" (1999), Janet Bergstrom also underlines this and says that it can be seen as the "need for attention - or a demand for attention - from the child" (Bergstrom 1999, 103) and is a characteristic of children of survivors of the Holocaust, as a natural result of the self-suppression of the aggression of the child towards the Holocaust survivor parents who are already anguished enough. From another perspective, Barbara McBane states in her article "Walking, Talking, Singing, Exploding...and Silence: Chantal Akerman's Soundtracks" that Akerman's emphasis on the voice, the humming and "chantlike quality" of her films (Margulies 1996, 153) have their origins in the musical traditions of Jewish culture and are used by Akerman as a self-defence mechanism against the sorrowful Jewish past of her family (McBane 2016, 42-43).

In addition to this desynchronised and eccentric sound structure of the film, I think the location of the film is very significant. In *Saute ma ville*, the film location is a tiny, claustrophobic kitchen, which has an emblematic significance and meaning for Akerman, and this occupies an important role in Akerman's later works as she provocatively chose the kitchen as a strong metaphor for the incarceration of a domestic housewife in *Jeanne Dielman*. In the final scene of the film, the young girl blows herself, the kitchen and the town up, a fade-out occurs, and she sings a song in a childish voice. Thus, the strong contrast between death and youth is shown in a melancholic way.

To sum up, *Saute ma ville*, which is the precursor of Akerman's feminist film career at the same time, is an uneasy and rebellious short and a substantial and stimulating work on behalf of the

liberation of women who are stuck in the domestic arena. From this first film onwards, Akerman signals that she will offer neither an easy and comfortable experience for her viewers, as in mainstream Hollywood films nor will she favour the traditional women's roles that privilege the male gaze (Mulvey 1975, 6-18).

### **2.1.2 *Hotel Monterey***

While *Saute ma ville* is a striking starting point in Akerman's career, her first feature film *Hotel Monterey* (1972) is also another remarkable piece of work, and one of her most experimental films. The film is a silent documentary which consists of long static shots from the interior of an old welfare hotel in New York and it can be seen as Akerman's first exilic film, because even though the hotel guests are not real exiles, they are lonely, old and destitute people who have been expelled from the active, joyful and wealthy social and economic life, and they are "internal exiles" (Naficy 2001, 111-112). As one of the most structural works of Akerman and a reflection of the influence of Michael Snow and

Jonas Mekas on the director, *Hotel Monterey* is a highly structural film in which Akerman shows the hotel corridors, rooms, windows, elevators and the guests of the hotel for extended minutes through her stationary camera. Throughout this avant-garde film, Akerman sometimes fixes her camera in front of a column and frames it continuously. During an interview for *Artforum*, Akerman explains her interest in fixed shots in her own words:

**When you look at a picture, if you look just one second, you get the information, "that's a corridor." But after a while you forget it's a corridor; you just see that it's yellow, red; that it's lines; and then again it comes back as a corridor. If you don't stay long enough, if you don't stare, you will never forget that this is information about a corridor. I want people to lose themselves in the frame, and at the same time to be truly confronting the space. (Akerman 1983, 58)**

Indeed, along with the fixed shots which were identified with her filmmaking, the use of real time is also one of Akerman's characteristic and deliberate formal strategies, and it is very apparent in this documentary that she intends to make the spectator feel the passing of time. Regarding the extended use of time duration in her films, she says that, though the spectators are bored while they are looking at the screen, the actual waiting for the following shot also makes them feel that they are alive, and that they exist (quoted by Schmid 2010, 22).

In the film, the reflections of Akerman's interest in the visual arts can be seen explicitly. She

frames the hotel guests in their rooms, where they stand still with almost impassive faces. The compositions and warm lighting of the frames make spectators feel that they are watching a tableau rather than a film frame. As she indulges in presenting the quotidian, which has a very important place in her cinema, as will be revealed in her later works, she also shoots the sink or bathtub in the rooms. Long shots of dark or dimly lit and quiet corridors with a stable camera cause a compelling effect on viewers throughout the film. After the first half an hour, the film continues with the back-and-forth camera movements of the stationary camera towards the hotel window, and it covers the shots of the lights of neighbouring buildings at night or the outer wall of the hotel in the day time. Towards the end of the film, Akerman starts exterior shooting with a couple of pan shots and vertical panning shots.

*Hotel Monterey*, this documentary film which is silent and non-narrative, and favours narration more, is one of the most innovative works of Akerman in terms of exhibiting a filmmaking style that plays with the possibilities of experimental cinema ingeniously via her fixed camera, extremely long shots and lack of sound. The film is also an exemplar of Akerman's thematic choices that prioritise exhibiting the lives of the disadvantaged and marginalised people who commercial cinema treats as if they are invisible (Schmid 2010, 23). As the most appropriate filmic space that exposes the loneliness and dislocation of these people, Akerman uses one of the most substantial transitional spaces, the hotel, for the first time in this film, and then these transitional spaces become a significant part of her films such as *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* and *Toute une nuit*, consisting of urban encounters in hotel lobbies, cafes, restaurants, bars and pavements. These films are "architecturally marked by the threshold" (Bruno 2007, 101), hence, as viewers "we remain at the threshold" (Bruno 2007, 101).

### **2.1.3 *Je, tu, il, elle***

After shooting two more short films - *La Chambre* and *Le 15/08* - in New York, Akerman made her second feature film, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, a black and white, French-Belgian, minimalist and episodically structured film that can be divided into three parts. The film is about a young adolescent girl's self-confinement and alienation from the outside world, and the process of the exploration of her sexual identity, which is a common theme of Akerman's various films including *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, *Nuit et Jour*, *La Captive* and *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*. Similar to *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, it is also a road movie, as

in the second part Julie leaves her room and gets in the lorry of a male truck driver and stops at various places - a bar, restaurant and presumably a hotel room - with him; besides it has the features of an epistolary film as it contains “inhibitions and prohibitions against writing and speaking” (Naficy 2001, 113). Naficy explains these inhibitions in the film in these words:

**In the first episode, Akerman cannot write, and in the second, she does not speak. Even when, in the third episode, a personal visit is substituted for the failed epistolary communication, it is shortlived and muted. Another fascinating aspect of the epistolary desire that the film brings up is the relationship of epistolarity to orality, in its widest interpretation. (Naficy 2001, 113)**

In the first part of the film, Julie - Akerman herself - is in a room that has little furniture, trying to write letters to someone that we don't know - latterly we find out that she writes these letters to the “elle”: her ex-girlfriend who appears in the third part of the film, and she spends her days in a depressed, passive and isolated mood. I use the word “passive”, because in the first half-hour of the film, Julie can do hardly anything except paint her room in various colours - though we do not actually see these actions and we do not even know the actuality of these actions since our only source of information is Akerman's voice-over narration about her “actions”- and change her furniture around while she is emptying the room in a very depressed way. She tries to write a letter for twenty-eight days, she rearranges these letters again and again, sometimes she stops writing and then continues; nevertheless she can't complete or send them in the end.

One of the most remarkable moments of this first part is undoubtedly Julie's repetitive and obsessive eating of sugar from a paper bag during her unsuccessful writing attempts. In her article “Personal Pronouncements in I.. You...He...She and Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 1960s in Brussels”, Maureen Turim refers to Julie's obsessive sugareating and her inability in writing letters, by drawing comparison to Robert Bresson's teenagers in *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956), and she interprets this repetitive eating act as the character's disjunction from a world that represses her, and describes it as “displacement from a will to escape to food eaten obsessively” (Turim 1999, 15). From a similar perspective, in her article "Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman" Brenda Longfellow explicates Akerman's repeated sugar-eating as an attempt to fill a "psychic core of emptiness" (Longfellow 1989, 86).

At one point, Julie strips off her clothes and stays naked in her almost dark room and, she lies on the floor as if she wants to evade the restrictions of the outer world and the determined roles of societal life by turning to a “primitive state of being” (Schmid 2010, 28). While she is lying on

the floor among the incomplete letters, she continues eating her sugar; the naked female body serves as a signifier of her character's isolated and detached state of mind.

During this first part of the film, Akerman uses gestures and body language in a highly performative way, which Deleuze also links to Akerman's willingness with regard to showing "gestures in their fullness" (Deleuze 1989, 196). By presenting Julie as she writes and arranges the letters, repeatedly spoons up the powdered sugar, counts the passing days, takes off her clothes and lies on the floor, she exhibits "bodily attitudes as the sign of states of body particular to the female character" (Deleuze 1989,196). Also, this kind of gestural and non-narrative performance reminds us of American performance art in the 60s and 70s, the dance performances of Pina Bausch and Trisha Brown, and Margulies also refers to American dancer Yvonne Rainer's minimal, everyday performances' effects on Akerman, and how she pays homage to Rainer's movement and seriality-based performance style, especially in this film (Margulies 1996, 50). Just as Rainer's style puts a distance between the spectacle and the spectator, the same situation can be observed while watching performative acting in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*.

Akerman's impressive minimal aesthetics is especially apparent in this first episode. She prefers frontal camera compositions as her camera stays stable, the room is almost unfurnished and dimly lit in most of the scenes. Also, there is no music in the film; instead, the sounds of passing vehicles that carry into the young girl's room can be heard from time to time. Her voice-over narration and the images on the screen are usually desynchronised, as mentioned before; thus, the director impedes the creation of a "fantasmatic visual space" (Doane 1980, 36) which is constructed by the spatialised and localised voice. The austere and minimalist mise-en-scene of the apartment serves as complementary to the sense of isolation and loneliness that the character feels.

Like *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, the film consists of passages, instability, rootlessness. With the ending of the first part, it turns into a road movie, and the protagonist, who has been living in her inner world in the first part, leaves her subjective world and home behind, thumbs a lift and meets with the "il": the truck driver. She gets in his truck, they go to a restaurant and a pub together. Thus, Akerman uses transitional spaces as the background of an encounter as she will later use them in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*.

In the film, which deals with gender roles and sexual identities, while the male is aligned with the road, movement and action - the spheres of freedom - the female is offered waiting and inertia (Schmid 2010, 29). On the other hand, while Akerman is almost invisible and at the edge of the screen during the truck scene, the truck driver is in the centre of the shot. Both inside the truck and in the places they enter, they do not talk about anything. While the male is totally in his own world, so that he barely looks at Julie's face, does not pay any attention to Julie's presence as if she is not there and seems very self-assured, Julie seems submissive and shy in contrast to him. Finally, the last time they get into the truck again, he talks for the first time and asks Julie to masturbate him. Neither during this sexual act nor afterwards do we see the female character within the frame or hear her voice, rather the camera focuses on the male body and voice only. Following his moment of pleasure, he starts on a long and stereotypical monologue that involves intimate details of his private life such as how he met with his wife and their sexual problems after the birth of their children, and his own sexual fantasies, while Julie listens to him as a passive listener throughout all these moments. The same, selfish heterosexual male figure, who utters a monologue on the intimate details of his life, problems or desires, also emerges in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, as will be examined during analysis of the film in Chapter 3. Finally, in the last scene of this second part, we see them in the bathroom of a hotel room - or the driver's own place - where the truck driver shaves in front of the mirror as a routine masculine activity, and Julie watches him without talking.

The last part of the film consists of Julie's visit to her ex-girlfriend's home and the sexual relationship between them. In the beginning, her ex-lover asks Julie to leave, whereupon Julie intends to leave, puts on her jacket, reaches the elevators, but then she changes her mind and stays there. Later, in a childish voice she says that she is hungry and asks her girlfriend, "elle", to prepare a sandwich for her. After eating it, she immediately asks for a second one. Thus, after the obsessive sugar-eating scene, Akerman once again uses the orality that Naficy mentions while analysing the relationship between epistolary desire and orality in the film (Naficy 2001, 113). Furthermore, she uses this repetitive motif of an eating disorder in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* too, as will be discussed later in Chapter 3. It is also significant that, after eating her second sandwich, Julie grips her ex-lover's breasts while undressing them; all these actions related with nurturance can be interpreted as the signifiers of a desire for the mother (Turim 1999, 15).

In the next shot, we see the two women in bed, naked and having sex. The loud rustling noises of

the sheets and moans accompany the sexual act, but this moaning is out of sync with the images, it distracts attention and reduces the erotic effect of the scene. Besides, their actions are more like wrestling than lovemaking, they roll over in the bed again and again, we do not see them kissing, or touching each other's breasts. Turim defines the awkwardness of the scene as . . . Only the rollicking foreplay of an almost unintentional meeting of these women's bodies fills the duration of the bedroom encounter" (Turim 1999, 19). Only when they are having oral sex and the ex-lover envelops Julie's sex organ, it is more like a sex act, but still this whole sex sequence is out of the ordinary for the viewers who anticipate a familiar sex scene that can be described easily or matched with the usual images of sexuality presented in films. She only uses one close-up within the sequence, it is from behind the head of their bed as they embrace and kiss each other, and it finally shows the mutual desire and passion between them. Still, the film does not offer an image of romanticised lesbian love to the viewers. After the sex act ends, the next morning Julie dresses and leaves her ex-lover's home.

When looking at the whole sequence, due to the sound-image construction and shooting technique which does not involve any close-up of the sexual organs or parts of the bodies, we can say that the lovemaking between the two women far from meets the expectations of the typical male gaze, and Akerman avoids giving the narrative "a different mode of eroticism" (Mulvey 1975, 12) in the presentation of female sexuality or a lesbian relationship. Rather, she shows the possibility of a different and sensory sexual relationship, in contrast with the selfish male orgasm in the second part of the film, and she does this via using her striking and impressive formal strategies that are specific to her art.

As indicated in the first paragraph, Hamid Naficy classifies this film in the context of epistolary films and regards Akerman's failed letter-writing attempt as an inhibition against communication, while he claims that this kind of inhibition is one of the key features of epistolary films made by accented -exilic- directors (Naficy 2001, 115). Similarly, he claims that Julie's inability to speak while she is with the truck driver, and her short and almost totally silent visit in the third episode, are also parts of this inhibition. According to him, this rendering of long silences in the film is also another quality of accented films, especially epistolaries, as they are "counterhegemonic discourses on ideology and cinema" (Naficy 2001, 122). He also points out that epistolary form is a discourse of desire, because it creates a connection between the distanced parties. This desire can be in the form of a rebellion, and homosexual relations in the

epistolaries can be considered as a kind of rebellion against the traditional norms that favor heterosexuality (Naficy 2001, 111). Lastly, Akerman herself plays in the film as Julie, and this kind of autobiographical match between the characters and the director is a common quality of epistolaries.

Apart from its minimal but impressive formal aesthetics, when we look at it from the thematic perspective, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* is one of the pioneering films that centre on female desire and sexual identities, loneliness and isolation, and it is the forerunner of Akerman's ground-breaking film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*.

#### **2.1.4 *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels***

Akerman shot her breakthrough film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*, in Brussels in 1975. The film was written by Akerman, photographed by Babette Mangolte, and the editor of the film was also a woman, Patricia Canino. Akerman's feminist masterpiece shows three days in a widow's monotonous and suffocating life, using real time and capturing the highly expressive and gestural performances of the main character, Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig).

Her daily work follows the same routine every day: making beds and preparing breakfast for her son in the mornings, and shopping for the home, preparing dinner as the hours pass, in addition to prostituting herself for the men that come to her home at predetermined dates and times. Her life, which is full of boredom and stability, is devoid of affinity or communication with anyone, either her son whom she lives with, or anyone from the outside world. First, we witness her mindnumbing routines on two days. Though everything seems on track at first view, the obsessive timing of Jeanne's daily work, the miscommunication between Jeanne and her son, and some of her gestures which reveal her distress, hint at the calm before the storm in Jeanne's life. On the third day, after a setback, she starts losing control over her daily activities, which are the guarantors of her escape from confrontation with herself. Then, following a reluctant orgasm, the notion of "return of the suppressed" becomes a fact, and she murders one of her clients at the end of the film.

Similar to *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, this film also contains letter-writing in its narrative, evidencing Akerman's tendency to use the epistolary form within her films. Jeanne gets some letters from her sister in Canada, and through these platitudinous letters, her sister repeats her prosaic and

recitative beliefs regarding the domestic world, being a woman and marriage. The same outdated beliefs and statements about the miserable situation of a lonely woman, and the necessity of marriage for a female are uttered by Anna's mother and her Polish-Jewish friend Ida in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* too. Jeanne reads these letters in a flat and monotone voice, and Akerman uses this toneless reading style which reduces the meaning of the contents, in her following work, *News from Home*, too. On the other hand, none of the letters, or "the monotone dialogue-qua monologues" (Margulies 1996, 47) can create communication between the characters throughout the film. Akerman applies an extended version of these monologues in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Akerman treats *Jeanne Dielman* as an outcome of her investigation into style in the United States and story-telling in Europe (Kinder 1977, 3). The film can be considered as Akerman's first work that has a traditional narrative style; however, with her hyperreal and anti-illusionist style, Akerman once again inverts the rules of conventional cinema, as she fixes her camera on a domestic woman's mundane activities, which are usually eliminated in conventional narratives. In this sense, the film is the primary work on "woman's everyday existence" (Margulies 1996, 3) since Akerman shows the ellipted parts, the "images between the images" (Akerman 1976, 92) while reflecting a woman's daily life. As Mary Ann Doane also points out:

**The specificity of the film lies in the painful duration of that time 'in-between' which is exactly proper to the woman (in particular, the housewife) within patriarchal society.. Hence the narrative structure is a parodic 'mime' that distorts, undoes the structure of the classical narrative through an insistence upon its repressions. (Doane 1981, 34-35)**

Indeed, the film renders a woman's loneliness, isolation and self-imprisonment, presenting each detail that can be seen as unspectacular, as indicated above. As an example, Jeanne's tasks such as peeling the potatoes or preparing the meatloaf for dinner is shown blow-by-blow, from start to end. On the other hand, when we look from the spatial perspective, "house" has a significant place in Akerman's works "as a site of passage" (Bruno 2007, 100) for her protagonists, the exilic, vagrant characters in her films. Like the young girl in *Saute ma ville*, or Julie in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, Jeanne is also an exilic character, she is exiled from the enjoyment and cheerfulness of social life and individual freedom.

When we look more closely at Akerman's formal choices within the film, her uncompromising camera remains fixed, she avoids doing any cut-ins, close-ups, or shot/reverse shots, and she

mostly uses her signature symmetrical, frontal compositions from a certain distance to the character. Silences or very rare dialogues -halting speech, as Laura Mulvey states - and the unpretentious mise-en-scene (using an apartment, mostly the kitchen as the film space during most of the three hours -except for the few moments when Jeanne goes out shopping or to the post office or drinks coffee alone) this display of the repetitive daily activities, form her film's world and create its meaning. In the absence of words, Akerman presents Jeanne's almost "pathological", repetitive gestures ingeniously, to exhibit Jeanne's mental state. Throughout the film, while her body language reflects her deep alienation, her obsession with cleaning and order turns into a "housewife's psychosis" (Longfellow 1989, 82). Also the use of body language occupies an important place in the film, as it signifies the character's desires or reluctance for sex. Jeanne's body seems totally de-eroticised and it can be easily noticed that even prostitution and her other daily work have the same significance for her.

Undoubtedly, Akerman's use of silence in the film is critically important in respect to her exhibition of a suppressed bourgeois woman who is restricted to domestic work. In her article, "A Neon Sign, A Soup Tureen: The Jeanne Dielman Universe" (2016), Laura Mulvey associates Jeanne's silence in the film with the melodrama genre, while she also approaches it from the feminist perspective. According to her, while hysterical explosions and weighted gesticulations together with the language of silence and misunderstandings, evoke the unconscious; they also allude to women's muteness, mislocated in the legislation and culture of patriarchy (Mulvey 2016, 30). This muteness and the law of patriarchy push Jeanne into a kind of insanity, and at the end of the film she stabs and kills one of the men whom she has sexual relation with.

The way that Akerman presents a domestic woman's incarceration within her time-rigid routine makes *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* one of the most significant pieces in feminist cinema. Akerman's own words summarise the filmmaker's mentality and approach to cinema and the female body. She states that she avoids "cutting the woman into a hundred pieces" in the film and she prefers "cutting the action in a hundred places, to look carefully and to be respectful" (Akerman 1977, 119). Also, with avoiding shots/reverse shots and close-ups, she prevents the conventional distribution of the looks between various characters; instead, there are two owners of the looks in the film: The character and the director. Hence, she creates two forms of the feminine: One of them is Jeanne, "feminine *manquee*" (Bergstrom 1977, 117) who is assimilated in the law of patriarchal order, and the other is Akerman, who provides an active

and feminist look in the direction of Jeanne's objective circumstances of her suppression.

The film's significance in terms of the feminist perspective stems from Akerman's approach to femininity from various aspects. The film both delineates a domestic woman who is sexually oppressed in a typical, bourgeois society in Brussels in the 1970s, but also displays how she experiences the same oppression within the family too. During one of the rare dialogues between Jeanne and her son Sylvain, he tells Jeanne about his former desire to kill his father whose penis is like a sword that hurts her mother. This is a typical Oedipal scenario, but on the other hand it reflects his unconscious desire to inhibit any sexual discourse with his 'sacred' mother who is purified from any sexual desire. Also by paying a lot of attention and dedicating extended time to the daily life of a domestic housewife, a mother, the film is a kind of negotiation, a kind of compensation for the distance between Akerman and her own mother (Longfellow 1989, 81), so it can be said that through this film she pay homage to her mother. Moreover, during some interviews made with her, the filmmaker accepts the fact that she made this film after observing her mother and the other women in her family in Brussels. Finally, by focusing her extended shots on each detail of Jeanne's daily routine, she contributes to the visibility of the unpaid and unvalued labour of all housewives.

In addition to its extraordinary narrational strategies, and its feminist stance, I believe that one of most assertive characteristics of *Jeanne Dielman* is the way it manipulates the viewers. Throughout the film, Akerman's formal strategies keep them distant, as in the Brechtian style, but also encourage them to think about and analyse both the character and the total space that surrounds her, accepting all the banalities and mundane activities in the narrative, being an observer of the story in a detached way. Although the repetitions and real-time method in the film demand a more engaged spectatorship experience, it is still absolutely fascinating as a result of its psychological depth, and Akerman's eccentric way of showing everyday life and the imprisonment of a woman through interior spaces; hence it is also very attractive for those viewers that are primarily interested in understanding human psychology and human nature.

As expressed before, in her works Akerman generally uses themes from her private life. Marion Schmid, in her book, looks at the film from a different perspective and establishes an analogy between Akerman's Jewish identity and *Jeanne Dielman*, for two reasons. The first one is because of Delphine Seyrig's role in Akerman's *Golden Eighties*, since she played a Holocaust

survivor in the film, and the second reason is the startling sound of the gas over the opening credits of *Jeanne Dielman*. (Schmid 2010, 50) Though there is not a direct reference in the film to concentration camps, I agree with this interpretation when it is considered that there are so many autobiographical and auto-textual references in Akerman's oeuvre. Similarly, in *Saute ma ville*, the death of the young girl occurs as a result of a gas explosion, which can also be read as a similar subtle reference to the camps.

To sum up, *Jeanne Dielman* is very radical and provocative in both its style and story, and is a milestone in the history of feminist cinema. Above all, the film is a perfect reflection of Akerman's interest in mundane everyday life; a skilful game of time and space; and it shows how routines can both act as a tool of distraction, an escape from the self and meaninglessness, but also how they can create a deeper self-alienation that can end up in a deadlock.

### **2.1.5 News from home**

As Bruno says, Akerman's cinema is "an atlas of life" and "quite a grand tour" (2007, 102) and *News from Home* is one of Akerman's most significant works that can confirm this statement. This highly experimental, avant-garde 1976 film is almost a completely autobiographical work, which focuses on Akerman's mother's care and love for her daughter and also such themes as exile, "discovery of 'home' within what appears to be 'homelessness'" (Barker 1999, 42). During this documentary film, which presents a lot of extended long shots from the streets, subways, and stations of New York City, Akerman reads her mother's impassionate and longing letters she sent from her home in Belgium between 1971 and 1973 to her daughter living in Manhattan, New York in those years. As in the *Jeanne Dielman*, this film's cinematographer was Babette Mangolte. Throughout the film, Akerman and her mother's images are non-diegetic; instead, city images become the visual background for Akerman's voice. Akerman's stationary camera at intervals frames the side streets or large avenues that are empty or full of passers by. As indicated before, Akerman's cinema is a cinema of transition, and transitional spaces cover a significant part of her films, as will be seen when examination is made of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* in Chapter 3, too. Starting from her early works, Akerman continually shows that by using cafes, bars and the theme of journeys in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, or the hotel as the major film space in *Hotel Monterey*. In *News from Home*, transition becomes her main focus, and she directs her camera towards movement and transition over the course of the whole film. Indeed, she not only portrays

the active city life on the surface, but also the underground, mobility in the subways and stations occupy a very large space in the film too, such that her persistent, fixed shots show the empty or half-full subway stations for several minutes. Sometimes, Akerman gets on the subway, where passengers look at her camera with blank faces or curious glances. She displays book stores, buildings, restaurants, everything belonging to the urban landscape with her camera. Rather than the familiar, iconic, landmark places of New York, she focuses on “‘lived’ spaces of everyday life” (Barker 1999, 42). Akerman uses no music in the film, and the soundtrack of the film consists of her voice-over reading her mother’s letters, in addition to the sounds of the city: traffic, cars, and streets. The sound that accompanies the visuals is frequently out of sync, contributing to the disjunction generated by the voice-over (Schmid 2010, 51). Towards the end of the film, Akerman’s camera gets more mobile and she starts using some panning and tracking shots too. The film ends with one such tracking shot from a ferry that shows Akerman’s departure from Staten Island towards Manhattan in a misty atmosphere, gloomily pointing out Akerman’s departure from her adoptive home, “across la mer (the sea) to la mère (the mother)” (Schmid 2010, 53), reversing her Polish Jewish antecedents’ trajectory from East to West.

The film’s autobiographical dimension is substantial in terms of reflecting the dynamics of the special relationship of the filmmaker with her mother, and the devotion of the mother to the daughter. Within these intimate letters, Akerman’s mother recounts the familial situations including the birthday of a family member or the wedding of another; her husband’s or her own health problems and the family’s financial situation. Above all, each letter is a declaration of the yearning and love of a mother for her daughter. In each letter, her mother asks Akerman to write more frequently, and expresses how much they miss her and wonders if she is in good condition in New York. In the form of enunciation of the daily news from home, each letter is a marker of the mother’s fears about the physical distance that might also increase the potential of emotional distance between her and her daughter. While the mother’s dependence on her daughter can be deduced from some of her iterative words, Akerman’s impassive tone of voice reveals that she is now in another home and living her own life, writing her own story (Irigaray 1981, 60-67). If we look at the contents of the letters, in one of them her mother says:

**Dear Chantal. I guess, the weather is hot there. I sent you some summer dresses. I hope that the address I have is correct. It came as a surprise for me that I didn’t receive any letters from you this week. Last week, three letters came but this week there is not any. Please always write to us. I hope that my letters reach you...This summer, some weekends we won’t go out of town, we will spend time at the seaside. It is time to economise... I hope that it is a temporary situation, because we should work.. .My love, I am waiting for your letter. Don’t work too hard. I am sending you my love. Your**

**daddy, Sylviane, all of them are sending you kisses. Lots of love, mom.**

In another letter she complains about the shortness of her daughter's letters and says:

**My dear daughter. After a long break, you have written a short letter again. Yes you are busy, but try a bit, write more frequently. Please tell me especially about your health and how you can support yourself there. There is no other news, your father's throat is recovering. I have had no time to rest, I had to go back to the shop. I will leave the shop to Lydie in the mornings and I will take it over in the afternoons. Danny passed the exam, he will study photography in Paris. Though his family wanted something else, they let him decide on his own. I had last seen them after their vacation in Spain. Whoever I see is asking about you. Sweetheart, take care of yourself. Greetings and sincere regards from your father, Sylviane and the rest. Lots of love, mom.**

In another one, she writes:

**.Sweetheart, we haven't seen you for such a long time. We always talk about you. Your father is missing you a lot and he hopes that you can fend for yourself. If you have to stay there longer, do something to take your mind off it. We can endure it. We have been enduring it for a long time actually. Your father says "if only she would come". Sweetheart, lots of love. Your mother... who loves you and thinks of you all the time...**

In some of letters her mother states her desire for Akerman's return home to Belgium, but in the next breath she says that she does not want to be a selfish mother and states that she will not be upset if her daughter continues to live in New York. Thus, with each letter, both Akerman's mother's attachment to her daughter and her anxious character become more apparent. In "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other" (1981), in Luce Irigaray's lyrical address from a daughter to her mother, she says "And, as I've gone, you've lost the place where proof of your subsistence once appeared to you" (Irigaray 1981, 64). It makes us feel that, when Akerman was away from the homeland, her mother also experienced a similar kind of loss, as can be understood from the words: "We can endure it. We have been enduring it for a long time actually..."

There is a thin line between Akerman's linguistic exchanges meriting attention, and deserving to be ignored because of their repetition, and this dichotomy reaches its peak in *News from Home* (Margulies 1996, 150-151). Throughout the film, Akerman's voice that is reading her mother's letters is almost emotionless and toneless, but also in a rhythm as a part of the "litanylike quality" of her films (Margulies 1996, 157). In this way, her films create an ambivalence between attracting the audience to the contents with its hypnotic effect, and making them neglect it at the same time. Moreover, the similar use of the voice while Jeanne is reading her sister's letters in *Jeanne Dielman* and the monologues in the same film, or Julie's voice in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, all create the same effect on the audience. Especially in the monologues in *Les Rendez-vous*

*d'Anna*, a similar kind of ambivalence between meaningfulness and inanity is at the core of the film. Though the repetitions, or hackneyed statements of Anna's interlocutors create the feeling that these words are totally trivial, on the other hand these recurring statements also deliver the most important details of their owners' lives or historical facts. Thus, the absurdity of the repetitions creates meaning in a paradoxical way. As Margulies points out in a chapter of, "Forms of Address: Epistolary Performance, Monologue, and Bla Bla Bla", "...the characters' insistence on long speeches intimates a meaning to be decoded. Even when an Akerman film advances more rhythmically than dramatically, there is a marked pressure for signification" (Margulies 1996, 157).

Through the letters in *News from Home*, we see how the "I" and "You", her mother and Akerman, were intertwined with each other. The words that are read by Akerman whose image is absent from the frame strengthens this feeling of intertwining. "Addresser and addressee are collapsed, disavowing an essential identity for either" (Margulies 1996, 151). On the other hand, while Akerman is reading these letters, the sounds of the city, the noises of the passing vehicles drown Akerman's voice at intervals, so that her mother's words cannot be heard at such moments. The unheard, lost words signalise both the physical distance between the addresser and the addressee and also imply the psychological detachment of the daughter living in New York; though the contents of the letters marks a deep intimacy between them. Via these concern shown in these letters, while Akerman's mother is searching for her missing daughter, the words resonate, as a mother's murmurs from the other side of the ocean. The accompanying impersonal images of New York streets and subways, along with Akerman's impassive reading style, also enhance this feeling.

During the New York years, perhaps, young Akerman needed more autonomy while she was starting her career and a space was also necessary in order for her to experience a new life and to create, to find herself. Primarily, her exilic and rootless character demanded such a separation from the mother. However, it should be pointed out that Akerman and her mother's relationship involved a two-sided intimacy. Apart from the biological bonds, or in addition to them, one of the reasons for Akerman's devotion to her mother is closely linked with her mother's Holocaust past and Auschwitz days. The documentary film, *No Home Movie* is a beautiful piece of evidence of Akerman's compassion towards her mother because of her tough and grief-stricken

past. Similarly, as a member of another oppressed community, Alice Walker - a black woman, writer and feminist - addresses black women from history in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (2005) and expresses her respect and love for these women because of all the cruel treatment they endured in the past (Walker 2005, 231-243).

As indicated above, *News from Home* is an epistolary film, and within the chapter "Epistolarity and Epistolary Narratives " in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporing Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy describes *News from Home* as a epistolarily structured "daughter-text" which involves a conflict within it, a conflict that stems from the difference in vision of the mother and the daughter. He says that, together with Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988), in both films mothers are looking to the past and their homeland which is far off now, while the daughters are engaged in the here and now (Naficy 2001, 127). Indeed, *News from Home* is not only a film that exhibits the close relationship of a mother with her daughter; as stated before it also renders a kind of disengagement of the daughter from her mother as a result of her exilic identity and her literal, physical exile from the homeland, even it is voluntary. Naficy also emphasises the everyday nature of the letters' contents and the repetitiveness of their form in the film, and states that they constitute the "indexical present of life in exile" (Naficy 2001, 131).

Beyond doubt, Akerman's cinema includes many other significant and impressive documentaries and fiction films that centre on various themes such as mother-daughter relations, alienation, isolation and feminist themes, travel and exile; and reflect her characteristic filmmaking style, but in this thesis focus is on her 70s films specifically, because of the belief that these are the major works that make Akerman a groundbreaking, avant-garde *auteur*, along with the other works throughout her long career. In the following chapter, her last film in the 1970s, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, is analysed in the context of epistolarity. This Akerman film which complements her works in the 70s, is a quite significant work as it combines together a lot of themes of her cinema within it, and it also delicately reflects Akerman's stylised aesthetics and avant-garde filmmaking.

### 3. TRAVERSING EPISTOLARITY IN *LES RENDEZ-VOUS D'ANNA* (1978)

In this chapter, I will analyse Akerman's autofictional 1978 film, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* within the context of epistolarity, and during my analysis feminist arguments will enrich my study. I believe that analysis of the film initially necessitates a closer look at the term "epistolarity".

Epistolarity, according to Janet Gurkin Altman's definition in *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form*, is "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" (Altman 1982, 4). When we look at the origins of the epistolary form, we can see that it started in the form of amorous epistolary discourse, such as in Ovid's *Heroides*, which consists of fifteen epistolary poems that are mostly focused on separation and the pain of the female, and it continued with the more contemporary literary versions in such as epistolary fictions as *The Portuguese Letters* (Barbin 1669), *Clarissa* (Richardson 1748) and *Jane Eyre* (Bronte 1847). The common characteristics of these amorous epistolaries are that there is generally a heroine who is attached to a lover and suffers because of that lover's disloyalty and absence. Also, in these epistolary fictions, the heroine, despite all her desperation, struggles for her honour at one point. The writing process has two main functions for these female characters: first, it gives a sense of freedom that they are unable to achieve via speech, and secondly, they create an illusion as if the lover is there, and present; an illusion that "haunts every single heroine's discourse of desire" (Kauffman 1986, 35-36). Desire is the key point, and the main motivation behind the epistolary genre, as the letter is "a metonymic and a metaphoric displacement of desire" (Kauffman 1986, 38). As another significant feature of the epistolary form, it is nurtured by exile and loneliness. This exile is not just caused by the absence of the loved one, but also these characters are abandoned by their fatherland, their roots, their identity as well. Apart from these amorous epistolary discourses in literature, cinema, especially the melodrama genre, has also involved the epistolary form, again as an instrument of reflecting the character's desire, to "give voice to their deepest feelings" (Brooks 1995, 4). On the other hand, in Akerman's *News from Home*, Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* and Fernando Solanas' *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* (1985), exilic filmmakers have used the epistolary form as a tool to express themselves or to confess to others.

The reason I link *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* with the epistolary form is that the film intersects with this form both thematically and formally. First of all, the epistolary is a fundamental component of accented films, as Hamid Naficy also underlines (Naficy 2001, 101) and his definition of accented films will be useful at this point. In the Introduction part of his book, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Naficy describes what makes the films he discusses in his work “accented”:

**Another aspect of the accent is the style characterizing these films, whose components...are open- form and closed-form visual style; fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure; amphibolic, doubled, crossed, and lost characters; subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers. (Naficy 2001, 4)**

Hamid Naficy’s definition of accented films by exilic and diasporic directors -he includes Akerman in his list- generally covers Akerman’s narrative system; moreover this film specifically deals with “epistolary”, which is a significant characteristic of the films made by filmmakers like Akerman. He also divides epistolary films into three, as film- letters, telephonic epistles, and letter-films. According to him, film-letters involve letters and the act of reading and writing of letters by the film characters; telephonic epistles involve the use of telephones and answering machines by the film characters; and letterfilms “are themselves in the form of epistles addressed to someone either inside or outside the diegesis and they do not necessarily inscribe the epistolary media” (Naficy 2001, 101). This film includes these communication tools that Naficy refers to. In addition to the notes that Anna receives throughout the film, especially the use of telephones and the presence of the answering machine within the film makes it closer to the telephonic epistles. Above all, I argue that epistolary is a very significant device in this film, since Akerman does not show us anything directly throughout the film, and everything, including the telling of stories, is transmitted by the characters to each other. These characters’ monologues exhibit sections from the traumatic past of Europe or from their own personal stories, and they act as letters that inform both other diegetic characters and the spectators.

*Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is a road movie about a nomadic, woman filmmaker who is crossing Europe in the aftermath of the war. During her journey, she travels from Paris, France to Essen in Germany and back, and encounters a German man, her mother’s Polish-Jewish friend, a stranger on a train, her mother and her lover. The film focuses on such themes as World War II, Jewish identity, exile, displacement, dislocation and, “the relation of home, house, and voyage” (Bruno

2007, 100), and it is like a synthesis of all Akerman's other films. The film bears the characteristics of both fiction and autobiography, and it is very self-reflexive as it mirrors Akerman's life. The sameness of Anna's and Akerman's occupation, the characteristic of the mother-daughter relationship in the film, the references to lesbian sexuality, both Akerman's and Anna's struggles as a single woman who defies conventional rules, all of these explicitly exemplify this analogy. Besides, when we look at Anna's route in the film, all of the cities/countries in the film have great significance in Akerman's own life. Paris is the city where she lived for many years after her return from the United States. Considering the importance of World War II to Akerman's family, these destinations are significant in relation to the war, too. In wartime, Paris was under Nazi occupation until the city was liberated by France, the first country where the Allied Powers in Western Europe started the uprising against Germany in 1944. Germany is the country where Akerman's mother experienced the Holocaust. Belgium, where Anna stops on her way to Paris, is Akerman's motherland and at the same time the country which Ashkenazic Jews passed through in order to migrate to the United States. Apart from this self-reflexive structure of the film, in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, Akerman effectuates a general mapping of World War II as in Lars von Triers' *Europa* (1991), linking the leading cities and countries of the war to each other. In Higgins' words, "Anna's peripatetic itinerary speaks to an unconscious reenactment of wartime" (Higgins 1999, 66).

*Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is a film about memories, languages and physical travel that recalls back deportation of the Jews and the Holocaust. The cities where Anna's mother had lived 20 years before and where she survived become the arena for a journey of remembrance for Anna. The cities are connected like in other World War II films, the atmosphere is dark and grey, the characters are presented in a way that even the home where Heinrich (a German man and the first character Anna encounters in the film) brings

Anna seems to be divorced from the time the film is set in. The narrative -the structure and system Akerman uses to tell her story- and narration -dialogues, monologues, telephone calls- feed into each other in this loose mutual existence of space, time, text and images.

The filmmaker herself is not exilic, but her mother and her memories deal with exile; therefore the narration of exilic experience needs a paralleling, mirroring and mediating primarily through the film itself, and also through the telephone conversations in the film, the letters and other communication media. As a director, she needs a derived language that carries the memories of

her mother, who is a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust, and her identity as a lesbian/woman director as shown in her various films at the threshold between the avant-garde and the narrative film. She is someone “in between”, and this gaplike existence is both an effort to transubstantiate her mother’s past, and at the same time to construct her own.

A detailed analysis of this film is only possible through plot segmentation, because a story as is to be found in mainstream narratives does not exist in *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*. The film strikes us with its episodic, fragmented networks that integrate the past and present of Anna, her mother and other “beings” in the narrative, representing Chantal Akerman’s and her mother’s past and Europe’s past with its core divided between Germany, Belgium and France, the sites of Akerman’s identity.

At the beginning of the film, silent, plain credits start the film and the cast list appears in whitish capital letters on dark grey, almost black background. This gloomy opening signals the heavy atmosphere of the film. The film starts with a shot of a totally empty railway platform as the camera is located close to the top of the stairs leading to the exit. It is daytime and a road sign straight ahead of the camera shows the the directions as Hollestrasse, Stadmitte, Helbingstrasse, Susstadt and Gleise. Thus, it is revealed that this is a station in Germany. The loud noise of a train is heard first and then the train appears on the right side of the screen. A crowd, with their backs to the fixed camera, fills the frame in seconds and they head towards the stairs to the exit. A woman with short blond hair, a brown coat, grey skirt and carrying a bag parts from the other passengers who are going down the stairs, and without a cut we see her walking towards a telephone box on the platform. As the camera stays stable, she enters the telephone box. This time we see her from a wide angle but we do not hear any voice or know who she is calling. Meanwhile, the train at the platform starts leaving, we hear the loud noise of its departure. She leaves the telephone box in a minute, walks towards the camera again, and goes down the station stairs. As at the beginning of the scene, the camera shows the empty platform in long shot for a few seconds.

## **Hotel**

In the next scene, as in the previous shot, we see an empty frame of a hotel entrance first, and then Anna enters the hotel. At the reception, while she is checking in, we learn that her name is

Anna Silver (Aurore Clément). The receptionist talks to Anna with a doubtful and serious expression on his face, as if he is surprised that she really has a reservation. As the camera shows them sideways on, he gives her a note, and just then, the camera shows Anna frontally this time, from the receptionist's perspective, which is also a point of view shot, and also it is our gaze which we share with the receptionist. At that moment, a man sitting in an armchair in the lobby behind Anna, carefully looks at her from the back, as if he is trying to hear what she says, while the camera shows him out of focus. She quickly reads the note and learns that it is from her mother. She also learns that her mother has already called her too. She is surprised that her mother knows that she is staying there, and she asks the receptionist how her mother has learned this, but she cannot receive any satisfactory answer from him. Anna's mother's knowledge as regards her daughter's location and her call to the hotel before her daughter arrives there, imply that she is involved in Anna's life and follows her closely despite the physical distance between them. At the same time, the film suggests an autobiographical and intertextual reference from the first seconds, as Anna's mother evokes Akerman's real mother, who writes concerned letters from Belgium to her daughter in New York in *News from Home*. Viewed as a whole, this lobby scene is the inauguration/ouverture to the self-reflexivity and epistolarity interwoven at the beginning of the film. While Anna's arrival at the hotel is where it starts, the receptionist's announcement about the mother's call is where the epistolary mode is initiated, and both aspects function as a prologue to the whole narrative system.

During the conversation with the receptionist, Anna momentarily turns and looks at the man behind her as if she has felt his gaze on her, and the man quickly averts his eyes. The receptionist asks Anna, "You came here because of your film gala at the Roxy, right?" and Anna confirms it. This is also another self-reflexive moment in the film, which is saturated with the narcissism of Akerman. When we look at Akerman's life, her isolation, loneliness and being exempt from her family; she is in need of these letters, of the self-reflexive job -that of being a director- and this is why she uses these autobiographical components in her films.

Then, the receptionist continues and says, "You are the woman director of the film, right? A very interesting job." The gestures on Anna's face reveal that she is not pleased with this interrogation/questioning of her gender and of her being a director. She asks if there is a telephone in her room. From the very first minutes of the film, via gestures and the attitudes of the male characters towards Anna, we witness the exclusionary approach towards a woman

filmmaker, travelling alone. From the first moment Anna arrives at the hotel, the receptionist's attitude towards her is odd and apparently biased. His emphasis on the words "woman director", his comment on her job, and his tone of voice at that moment, all hint that he explicitly finds her being both a woman and a director weird. Besides, the man sitting in the lobby who stares at Anna from behind makes her feel that she is literally stuck in between the curious and analysing gazes of two men. On the other hand, the weirdness and gratuitous quality of the conversation between Anna and the receptionist is like a preview of the other redundant speeches in the film.

Just after their talk, a tracking shot follows Anna as she is walking towards the elevator. Here I would like to state that this is a repetitive shooting technique that Akerman will occasionally use throughout the film alongside her fixed shots; and these tracking shots in the film create the sense that Anna is always passing through something or somewhere as an unstable, permanent traveller. Before she gets into the elevator with the bellboy, the bellboy takes her bag from her hand and looks at her with a strange and senseless look similar to that of the receptionist.

When Anna enters her room, we see her with a puzzled expression on her face, as she is standing in front of the door to the room. She goes to open the bedroom curtains, while a tracking shot follows her. After that, a fixed medium long shot from the back frames her as she stands in front of the window and looks outside. Soon, she opens her windows wide and looks outside some more. The scene she sees from her window is of a train station, and at the moment Anna opens the window, the loud noises of the trains begin to be heard. Then, she closes the windows again and continues looking outside for a few more seconds, until a member of the hotel staff mistakenly opens her door and apparently interrupts her thoughts as is revealed on her face. Similar to Anna, the isolated and alienated character in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, Julie, also looks out of the window of her apartment as she spends her days trying to write letters to someone. She stays at home for 28 days as if paralysed, and the window becomes a separator between the world and her. Julie is also an exilic character, but while Julie is confined to home and suffering from a kind of inertia, Anna is restless about her immobility. She goes straight towards the window as soon as she enters the room, and this repetitive gesture in the film implies her inner uneasiness about being inside a place, in an interior space, and points at her deterritorialised identity.

Then she calls the reception and asks them to connect her to Prato, Italy. She rings off and while she is still standing near the telephone, the reception calls her back to inform her that they can

arrange the call within two hours. During these seconds, she looks pensive and preoccupied. On the other hand, this scene advances the film's epistolary mode, starting with Anna's mother's note and call to the hotel.

A cut to the bathroom shows Anna from behind while she is standing and looking at her towel, and then she turns to the camera and surveys the bathroom for a second. These kinds of moments which have no function in the dramatic structure of traditional narrative are normally elided from the plot; however Akerman favours the quotidian as part of her minimalist, hyperrealist style, as in *Jeanne Dielman* and *Hotel Monterey*. After a short tour of the room, she lies on her bed, as the fixed camera frames her from the side. In a moment, the frame composition changes, and we see Anna from a frontal angle; while she is still lying on her bed, she turns on the radio and stays this way for a while. Here, the sound of the radio functions as an apparatus which combines the past and present, space and time, narrative and narration. As is well-known, radio was a crucial medium of World War II and the film reflects the Zeitgeist of World War II by using the sound of the radio as a tool of the metanarrative. Akerman will use this medium throughout the film, alongside other rememorative markers of the war. Indeed, when Anna first turns it on, the song she hears recalls wartime marches, and Anna changes the station and this time a romantic song starts. While she is listening to the radio, the noises of the vehicles outside drown the sound of the radio and they meld into each other. Akerman generally uses street noise as a diegetic background sound in her films. In *Jeanne Dielman* and *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, it is possible to hear these sounds. On the other hand, here in this film, the extra loud sound of the traffic noises compress and sweep into Anna's private sphere and this acts as the monitor and signifier of her nomadic situation.

Then she stands up, opens her wardrobe and finds a necktie there. Meanwhile, we also hear a train's brakes squeak. As stated above, these vehicles that signify Anna's mobility and her in-between situation, are constantly used throughout the film both visually and aurally. She calls the reception to inform them and says "I found a tie. It's silver colored, I looked at its label, it looks like silk. It was in the second hanger on the left side of the closet. It may belong to the man that stayed before. It may belong to the man in the lobby...". Regarding the significance of this redundant phone call and also Anna's dialogue with the receptionist at the beginning of the film, Margulies states:

**Anna's motives for speech are inadequate and the speech itself clearly gratuitous. In spouting narrative clichés, expanding or compressing them and, mostly, saying them unwarrantedly, Akerman, as Anna, sings out of tune. And it is such slight but definite dislocation, the misplaced tone and accent of her writing, that wrings music from her text. (Margulies 1996, 161)**

With these kinds of excessive words of Anna and the dissonance in her speeches, Akerman both gives the character a kind of freakiness and also subverts the rules of traditional narrative, which eliminates inessential and unnatural remarks within the text. After reminding them to call her back in two hours, she takes her notebook from her jacket and calls the reception again to ask them connect her to a number in Cologne, Germany. As indicated before, Anna's destination points or the names of the cities that are accentuated in the film is significant. While Essen, Anna's current location, is an industrial centre of the Ruhr and home to the Krupp ironworks - armaments supplier for the Nazis during the war- Cologne is the city that was invaded by France and Britain before World War II, and the city was one of the most bombed cities in Germany during the war.

Anna starts talking to a woman named Ida, who has just moved to Cologne, as is understood from Anna's words. She tells Ida that she cannot come and visit her, she just wanted to say hello and she does not want her to come and visit her either. Throughout this short conversation, a medium long shot shows Anna standing and holding the phone in her hand; meanwhile, from the window behind her we see the trains in the station and hear their sounds in addition to the sound of the radio which is still on. She hangs up on the excuse that she is too busy and waiting for an important phone call. The last thing she says is that next day she will leave Cologne on an evening train. Right after she hangs up, the reception calls her again to say that the owner of the Roxy (the venue of her film's gala) and a journalist are waiting for her in the lobby. She says that she will be there soon and cancels her call to Italy.

When we look at the first fifteen minutes of the film, we can see that the epistolary mode is used in various ways, in the form of a note, phone calls, indeed we see Anna mostly talking on the phone except for the few minutes when she lies on her bed and listens to the radio. Although for a brief moment she is supposed to be comfortable and relaxed while she is listening to the radio on her bed, even in these instants she seems abstracted, with an inexplicable expression on her face. From the first minutes, the film also signals Anna's mobility and deterritorialisation through the sounds and visuals of the transportation vehicles, even though she is inside her room and busy with the phone calls or listening to the radio. Finally, the setting of her accommodation, the hotel,

along with motels “allegorize exilic and diasporic transitionality” (Naficy 2001, 253) and it will be the type of place that Anna will insist on, even when she has the chance to stay in a home during her visit to her motherland, Belgium.

## **Gala**

In the late afternoon, Anna leaves the hotel with the Roxy’s owner and the journalist, after a quick, silent handshaking in the lobby. After they leave, a fixed shot shows the entrance door of the hotel for a couple of seconds. Here I would like to point out that Akerman uses the same technique in most of the scenes in the film. Namely, she uses a fixed camera, shows the characters and the events, and when Anna or the others are at the post- diegesis, she does not stop framing immediately; instead she continues shooting an empty frame for a few more seconds. Thus, the existence of the bodies who have just left haunt the frames for a while. This shooting style is also a result of Akerman’s interest in symmetrical shots and framing, as she also stated in various interviews.

After the meeting in the lobby, the camera cuts to the gala venue which we see from the outside only. Anna stands and talks to a few people. A few seconds later, a man and a woman leave first, while Anna stays alone with a man, a Dutch primary school teacher named Heinrich (Helmut Griem). After the departure of the couple, the lights of the building also go out and as spectators, for a few seconds we can only see Anna and Heinrich’s silhouettes in the dark. Following this, they leave the building too. Once again the gala location is a transitional place, similar to the hotel. Additionally, the most important choice of Akerman here is that she does not show the gala itself, she just infers the connotation of the gala and we only see its venue but we are not witness to the gala event. She omits the gala and makes an ellipsis and we have to assume that the gala is over. Even the dialogue in some encounter after the gala is not shared with us, we do not know what others think about her film. No further news about the film is given in the film. This narrational strategy will be used by Akerman during the entire film, as will be revealed, and I believe that this is related to the missing parts in Akerman’s life, her memory of them. Her mother avoided giving information to Akerman about her Holocaust experiences, her traumatic past. According to Susannah Radstone’s definition in “Screening Trauma: *Forrest Gump*, Film and Memory”, “trauma refers to an event which, due to its shocking and possibly incomprehensible nature, prompts a shutdown in normal processes of assimilating or ‘digesting’

experience” (Radstone 2000, 88). After the Holocaust period, most probably Akerman’s mother experienced a similar kind of shutdown and also she did not want to reflect traces of the painful past onto her daughter, with the idea of protecting her. However, this led to a communication trauma in Akerman at this time, caused by the lack of information. I assert that the epistolary mode in this film is about this communication trauma and this is the reason why the filmmaker skips the events in the film, rather she uses monologues, words, to convey the information. The missing knowledge in her life reverberates like the missing events in the film. This is why the storytelling act is absolutely crucial for this film.

They leave the gala venue and we see them entering another transitional space, a bar, while the fixed camera stays distanced at the entrance to the bar. Just as in *Hotel Monterey*, this film is also based on a “geography of transit” as Bruno qualifies it; it is “a film of thresholds” which “heightens the very space of transit as transition” (Bruno 2007, 101). Besides, just like the gala scene, once again the director shows nothing regarding the time they spent in the bar and cuts to a tracking shot as Anna and Heinrich are silently walking on the pavement side-by-side at night. Akerman’s approach is also existentialist while she shows the outside of things and ignores events. When they stop near traffic lights, he pulls Anna towards him and kisses her on the cheek. At that moment, Anna looks like she is taken unawares and seems reluctant.

After a short walk along a pavement, a static shot depicts them from the outside of the hotel as they are entering the building. As usual, the camera continues to show the entrance for a few additional moments after they enter the hotel. In the next scene, we see them making love in Anna’s bed, and the bedside lamp illuminates their upper bodies that are naked and inside the covers. The radio is on and the Italian composer Daniele Patucchi’s instrumental *Even If You’re Not the First One* is playing. Suddenly, Anna pushes him off her and turns off the radio as her tension and uneasiness can be read in her face. Presumably, this Italian love song reminds her of the Italian, woman lover whom Anna has had a sexual relationship with before. This relationship will surface during Anna’s encounter with her mother. After this moment of nausea, Anna tries to continue the sex act again, but she finally stops and sits up in the bed. When Heinrich asks the reason for her reluctance, she says “We don’t love each other” and asks him to put on his clothes. After some hesitancy, he disappointedly gets up, as Anna stays in the bed and turns on the radio again.

A medium long shot shows Heinrich from behind while he is standing in front of the window. Depressingly, he says he has not watched the night for a long time and he makes for the door of the room to leave. Just before he leaves the room, he stops and starts a reproachful speech: "You meet with a woman and go with her. You think that wonderful things will happen. You are too hopeful." And suddenly, she says "Put on your clothes." You are alone again. Is life always like that?" Throughout the film we occasionally feel the shift between the traditional gender roles and Heinrich's reproachful tone, along with the contents of his speech implying this shift, too. As Roland Barthes also puts out in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, "in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized" (Barthes 1978, 14). During his hyperbolic monologue, the accompanying romantic music in the background theatricises his speech further. As Anna is in the offscreen space, it sounds like he is haranguing her. Anna says that she invites people to her home and she does not frequently say "Put on your clothes" to them, she lets it ride but she also does not think that something will be wonderful, actually she does not think anything. She adds that she is leaving the next day. Then, she comes and stands next to him, while they both stand face to face; she says that "In the past, when someone held my hands, I was thinking that it meant "I love you" and I was giving my everything including my hand." The indifference in both her words and her demeanour, evince her distanced and detached character.

In the next scene, the static camera shows a back view of Heinrich while he is about to leave the hotel. Throughout the film, in some shots Akerman shows characters coming into frame at random, a kind of plunge into the screen. Similar to the other things that she does not show during the film, characters' appearances in the frame are also all of a sudden and add to the sense of slippery ground and the uncertain atmosphere of the film. He turns and asks Anna if she wants him to give her his address and Anna's voice from the off-screen space says "Yes". This is also another repetitive shooting technique Akerman will use over the course of the film. Her static camera focuses on a character when he/she is talking and the reply comes from the off-screen perspective. This kind of a narrational strategy which subverts the shot/reverse shot technique of classical narrative cinema, is quite natural and usual for Akerman cinema as stated in Chapter 2, and she frequently creates distance between the spectacle and the spectator by using these kinds of formal strategies.

We see Heinrich's return from the door towards the reception again -though we do not clearly see

where he is really heading- and in the next shot we see two of them side-byside, in front of the reception desk. On a piece of paper, he writes his home address, home number and the phone number of the school and gives it to Anna. We learn that he is a primary school teacher. He invites Anna to his daughter's birthday. After asking Heinrich how old his daughter is, she says that "I would also have had two daughters, one would be five and the other would be six. I would have given them the names Judith and Rebecca. They are beautiful names". She adds "It was not the right time. It is nobody's fault." In "Echo and Voice in Meetings with Anna" Margulies asserts that the film is about a search but also an escape from fixed identity and even though the direct use of the word "Jew" is rejected in the film, the names Anna chooses for her children, Judith and Rebecca, are also biblical names. On the other hand, her unwillingness to establish a family qualifies her as a "mutant being" (Margulies 1999, 65).

In the next scene, a static camera shot depicts Anna from behind as she is walking along the hallway. She seems like she is not walking but she is dragging herself. Akerman frames her symmetrically, as if there is a centre line that divides the hallway into two and Anna is walking that line. While she is walking along the hallway, she suddenly stops in front of a room which has a tray in front of it. She kneels and after looking carefully at a pair of men's shoes next to the tray, she eats something from the plate on the tray. Suddenly she stops and throws the food onto the plate with a kind of displeasure and disgust. Anna's problem regarding the food will be obvious in various other scenes of the film, and this will be focused on in the following parts of the study.

When she enters her room, the radio is still on. She turns the light off and only light from outside leaks into the room and lightens the almost dark room a little. She sits on the bed, and with her back turned to the camera, she takes off her blouse. At those moments, as in the hallway scene, even if we do not see Anna's face, an impassiveness and a weariness can be felt from her slight, slow movements, her body language. She takes off her skirt too and lies on the bed naked and turns off the radio. For a few seconds, she looks blankly at the ceiling above her. Soon, she rises and a medium long shot shows her as she opens the curtains and looks at the station from across the room. The blurry lights outside are seen in the frame and the sounds of the trains at the railroad are heard once again. The reflection of Anna's face appears in the window while she is facing away from the camera. As might be remembered, when she first arrives at her hotel in the

beginning of the film and enters her room, she immediately opens the windows of the room and looks out at the station. At the end of a psychologically exhausting night which culminates in solitude, she finds herself in front of the window again. As is seen, Anna's propensity for being close to the windows and looking outside is a repetitive situation in the narration and will be reiterated throughout her journey, as an indicator of her uneasiness in a constant, stable space. For a nomad like Anna, who is uprooted and deterritorialized in terms of an existential perspective, being on the road is more than a simple act of transition. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the "novelistic chronotope of the road" (Bakhtin 2008, 120) and referring to one of his definitions, "a road is almost never merely a road, but always suggests the whole, or a portion of, 'a path of life'" (Bakhtin 2008, 120). Considering Anna's fluid and peculiar identity, being on the road is the most appropriate way of life for her, through her wanderings she tries to find herself.

The following day, at daybreak, after Anna had fallen asleep on the bed, the phone rings to let her know that Heinrich is in the lobby. Right after this scene, a tracking medium shot is used as she is walking along the hallway, where the doors are open and housekeepers are doing something within the rooms. She does not look into the rooms. After that, a static angle frames her from behind while she is still walking with her suitcase, "an object of travel", transition, in her hand (Bruno 2007, 134). The camera shows her and finally she leaves the screen.

At the reception, Anna talks to the receptionist. Heinrich is there too. The receptionist tells Anna that her mother and a man from Paris have just called her. She asks "When I'm in the elevator? Always same thing happens". As formerly mentioned, these redundant dialogues are very frequently used in Akerman films and this characteristic of her films causes them to be perceived as "theatrical" sometimes, since they involve the information that can be "necessary on the stage, or in a book, but is redundant in film" (Margulies 1996, 55). On the other hand, as can be noticed, the film's first minutes are replete with some disconnections, such as Anna's mother's call before she arrives at her hotel, her failed call attempt to Italy and lastly the calls of her mother and a man from Paris before Anna comes to the reception. She also learns that they have not left any message. Both Kauffman's and Naficy's arguments which assert that the epistolary form includes inhibitions and prohibitions against connecting, speaking or writing for varied reasons (Kauffman 1986, Naficy 2001, 115), can also be applied to *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*. As this film is also an epistolary narrative, these inhibitions against communication continue throughout the film.

## Heinrich's house

In the next shot, they are in the garden of Heinrich's house, walking towards the house as the camera shows them from behind. It is a big, green garden that has tall trees without leaves. Heinrich's house is seen on the right side of the frame. The weather looks dark, grey and gloomy. Then, screened in a frontal medium long shot, Heinrich introduces the place by saying "This is the place that I live", as they are looking towards the house which is in the off-screen space now. Behind them, some of the other neighbouring homes and some trees are seen in the frame. As emphasised in the beginning of the analysis, the film is mostly haunted by memories of the past, this house also seems as if it does not belong to the present or it is not a real place, so to speak, it looks imaginary. Heinrich tells Anna that the garden is full of tulips in summer time, and his father planted them, the tulips were his hobbies but he died at Stalingrad and now he himself cares for them. He also adds that he loves this house, he was born there and they (his family) were lucky since the house was left empty during the war. Anna asks if that place is in a suburb or not and Heinrich says it is not, it is in a separate city named Bottrop. It is another industrial town in the Ruhr that was once a mining centre in the early 1860s, chartered as a city in 1921, and bombed during the Oil Campaign of World War II. Combining Heinrich's anecdote about the war and his father, and also the history of Bottrop, we can say that this whole scene is an insert of the seemingly haunted house referring to World War II and the father who died during the war in Russia. The sounds of vehicles are heard in the background when he is talking. During this scene, while they are looking towards the home and Heinrich is talking about the home and his father in a melancholic way, Anna seems distracted with the things that Heinrich is telling her about his father and the story of the house.

Next, he walks on and in the off-screen space he continues talking about his past, and this time Anna is on screen and listening to him. He tells her that his father and grandfather once lived there, and now he lives there with his mother and daughter. A moment later, he stands in front of the house by himself, a medium long shot is used while he is standing in the garden, and the entrance to the house is seen from behind him. At that moment, he starts his long monologue. He starts telling Anna how his wife left him for a Turkish man and he got custody of his daughter, how he felt after his wife left him, how their relationship was before she left him by giving such intimate details as "Melting in her smell and skin was peaceful..." though he and his wife had no sexual relationship for weeks on end sometimes. This scene is reminiscent of *Je, Tu, Il, Elle's*

second part, in which a truck driver tells Julie many details about his relationship with his wife, including lots of information about their sex life before their children were born. This is the core of Akerman's film style. Traditional films show instead of telling and use dialogues or monologues, but Akerman does not show the events, there is always a storytelling through which we do not directly see the actions accompanying the narration. In the same way, in that scene in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* we do not see Julie, like we do not see Anna in this scene. This can be considered as the exhibitionist attitude of the heterosexual male figure; on the other hand, regarding the truck driver in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, Akerman underlines the importance of a "neutral listener, someone who enters your life for a brief moment and disappears afterwards" (quoted by Bergstrom 1999, 96). In a similar way, both Heinrich and the next people Anna encounters can be seen as people seeking this kind of neutral listener that Akerman depicts. This also echoes the analyst-patient relationship Taylor (2008) discusses in the "Psychoanalysis" chapter of *The Culture of Confession*. She refers to Julia Kristeva's definition of the practice of psychoanalysis which describes an analyst's task as "to respond to and "welcome" the patient's alterity in an interpersonal relation of two subjects who are both in-process and in which, if anything, the patient is dominant" (Taylor 2008, 146).

In a similar way, Akerman posits Anna like an analyst who neither judges nor openly approaches her interlocutors. From the viewer's perspective, especially in scenes where we do not see mutual dialogue, but instead we see only the speaker in the frame, Akerman imposes her response on the spectators. Thus, audiences are obliged to share the burden of the contents of the speech with the listener and also contemplate it thoroughly. On the other hand, these kinds of scenes, absent from the reverse shot, will reiterate throughout the film and make identification difficult for the viewers and create a distance between the audience and the film, since they dislocate the traditional dialogue system of classical cinema.

After delivering this very personal information to Anna -and to the audience- Heinrich walks away from the point where he is standing, he comes to the middle of the garden again, Anna also walks towards him and comes next to him. In a medium long shot, Heinrich continues talking about his wife and her Turkish lover and their passion for each other, and he complains about his wife's lack of caring for her daughter with a faraway and sad look on his face, as Anna listens to him carefully and with a partly puzzled look. The sounds of vehicles continued to be heard in the background, as in the former scenes of the film. In this surrealistic place, while they are standing

and the empty green garden lies behind them, they seem to be in the middle of nowhere. The colours and the composition make this shot tableau-esque. After talking about his familial issues, this time Heinrich tells Anna about how he became completely lonely after his best friend, Hans, got fired from the school he was working at, with accusations of treason and hostility against the state. He says that they were not very different with from each other, they had mutual pleasures, both of them knew *Don Giovanni* by heart; nevertheless sometimes Hans used to get depressed. Allusively, he adds “Being an enemy of the state is probably something like this”. Stating that he never understood exactly what happened in fact, he starts talking about the history of Germany and World War II in a disappointed and sad way. He says “In the 1920s in Germany, the communists sold hope to everyone...Equality for everyone, wealth sharing... When the year 1933 came, communists and many people were put into the camps and killed. The new regime gave hope to people again, after the painful years. Jobs for everybody, a bigger and more beautiful Germany. They said so. Later, the war broke out. One day, the war ended. Russians, Americans, Brits, the French and Belgians came. They divided Germany into two. They gathered up the rest of the Nazis and killed them or jailed them. There has been peace since then. Germany was recreated from its ruins. Everyone was mobilized. Afterwards, one day my friend lost his job, I lost my friend, a real good man. What did they do to my country? I ask myself what will happen to us.”

Heinrich’s speech which transmits very generic information about the history of Germany reflects the common perspectives of the post-war Germans who refused to take any responsibility or initiative or revolt to create any change; this passivity and pessimism were general syndromes of post-war Europe (Schmid 2010, 55-56). Within the context of epistolarity, as indicated before, this film is based on the transfer of stories, rather than showing incidents, and it has an accumulative and palimpsestic structure. Through each encounter, Anna and the audiences learn about the stories by means of the narrator’s delivery. In this sense, Heinrich’s speech constitutes the initial part of this structure. Though his speech consists of general and trite information, it also reflects how the personal and the historical intermingled after the war. He first talks about his familial issues and then connects this speech to the history of Germany. Also like Anna, all the other characters in the film are also exiled, lonely and despairing, abandoned by their lovers or their roots or identity, and the presence of these types of characters is an important feature of epistolary forms (Kauffman 1986, 40). Heinrich has also been abandoned by his wife and obviously feels himself to be an exile in his own country. Besides, the emotional and confessional

tones in Heinrich's speech are also characteristic of the epistolary form.

When he finishes his words, Anna does not make any response to him. As Akerman states, "She listens to his speech in its difference, its strangeness" (quoted by Margulies 1996, 17). This is an intended strategy in the film because Akerman cares about not eliminating the difference between the characters, though Anna's sentences, any comments she might make, would show her to be more human. Via these "talk-blocks", these extra long dialogues, or rather monologues (Margulies 1996, 17), Akerman preserves Anna's neutral position. They hug each other for a moment and Heinrich invites her into the house. In the following scene, a long shot shows the entrance of the house and Heinrich and Anna as they are walking towards the front door. They ring the bell, and an elderly woman, with a little girl next to her, opens the door, and the woman shakes Anna's hand warmly. All four enter Heinrich's home. Just like the bar scene in which we merely see their entrance and exit, Akerman shows nothing inside Heinrich's house. Also, even if Anna is a filmmaker, we do not see or learn anything regarding the gala night at the Roxy, we only see Anna and Heinrich's exit from the gala venue. Akerman shows us the places, doors, entrances, exits, but shows nothing from within the interior of these locations, except hotel rooms, thus she prevents us from seeing and learning much about Anna's life. During her journey, we generally witness Anna's dislocation and loneliness, which are the main characteristics of an exilic identity.

As formerly mentioned, and as I will postulate in the following sections of my analysis too, the missing parts in the narration are also a reverberation of Akerman's own life, which is "full of missing links, full of blanks..." (quoted by Bergstrom 1999, 110). In an interview, she says that: "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 stories, I searched for a false memory, a kind of imaginary, reconstructed memory" (quoted by Bergstrom 1999, 98). I believe that the missing parts of Heinrich's story -he does not directly use the word "Jew" for example and his speech is void of deeper information- along with the missing events (the gala, the bar, the lunch at Heinrich's house) are reflections of the information that her family avoided giving to her.

In the next scene, in a long, fixed shot, Anna and Heinrich are standing in the garden again, face to face. Anna tells him that she needs to leave, they have a short conversation about what went on

in Heinrich's home, Heinrich tells Anna that his mother and daughter liked her very much and Anna states that she also liked his daughter very much. After a short silence, he attempts to take her arm but Anna does not let him. Heinrich distressingly says that she is leaving him all alone.

After a silence between them, she turns her back on him and walks away. Due to Akerman's fixed camera angle, she is in the off-screen first, then she reappears in the frame, as she walks and passes by the big garden. Heinrich looks after her until she goes out of sight. In the meantime, beyond the garden, trains are seen in the distance. Like Anna's hotel, Heinrich's house is also close to the train station. Trains are not just the markers of Anna's mobility and nomadism; they also have a symbolic significance. They evoke the war, since the train was the vehicle that was largely used during the World War

II to transport Jews to the extermination camps.

Cutting to a medium frontal shot, Akerman shows Anna at the reception desk, as she is reading her mother's note, which tells her that she will be at the station in Brussels, and asks Anna to meet her there. She asks the receptionist if there is any other information about her mother's visit and the receptionist's off-screen voice says there is none. Once again an absurdity is felt within this dialogue, since Anna continually expects a response from the receptionist, who remains a stranger to the end. In addition to Akerman's interest in using these skewed and jarring dialogues in her films, once again I link Anna's desperate endeavour to get information to Akerman's own desperation caused by the lack of information about her family past and her mother's Holocaust trauma. Besides, for the second time there is a lack of communication between Anna and her mother. This is again part of the inhibition against communication in epistolary films.

Then, she reads a second note too, and tells the receptionist it is from Daniel in Paris. These notes are components of the film's epistolary form, and also act as the markers of absence, which is an inevitable part of exilic films that use epistolarity. As Ibanez states in her article "Women's Epistolary Cinema. Exploring Female Alterities: Epistolary Films and Epistolary Essay Films", "the epistolary film, caused by exile, generates a gradual identity portrait of maternal alterity that also faces the reality of absence" (Ibanez 2021, 4). In another epistolary film, *News from Home*, the sense of absence in a letter is increased through both Akerman's and her mother's absent images.

After asking the receptionist if there are any direct train to Brussels, she learns she can reach

Brussels via Cologne. As underlined before, all these cities have a special place in Akerman's history. When we look at Akerman's biography, her father was a Belgian who immigrated from Poland and her mother was also a Polish Jew. As Akerman herself states in her autobiographical documentary *No Home Movie*, her family escaped from Poland to Belgium because of the rigidity of the Polish people. However, during World War II, the Nazis arrested and sent them to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Somehow, they survived and after the war they returned to Belgium, where Akerman was born. During the interviews with Akerman, she expressed the fact that the traces left by this Holocaust period affected her mother deeply. Though she never talked to her daughter about what actually happened in these days, Akerman's own life and career were affected by this traumatic history of her mother. As stated before, the miscommunication with the mother, this blankness in her memory is the core of her filmic approach. In her films, the stories are generally presented outside the narrative system as the mother keeps silent about her trauma. For example in *Jeanne Dielman*, we never learn Jeanne's whole story in the first person, rather we get some information regarding her life through her sister's letters or the fragmentary and tainted conversations between Jeanne and her son. Even if it is told in the way Heinrich does it, then the space -the house- is taken out of the narrative. On the other hand, "because of these architectural omissions" as Bruno states, "we are taken into Anna's own nomadic architecture and restless space" (Bruno 2007, 100).

Her Jewish identity also directly affected her displaced character. Akerman says that: "... I don't have the idea of land. Just the opposite, I have the feeling that I am not attached to the land under my feet" (quoted by Bergstrom 1999, 109). Though she is not attached to any land or any identity, she digs into her past through her works, as if she is trying to understand both her mother's, and hence her own past better. As Alisa S. Lebow states in *First Person Jewish*, she is the "Jewish descendant who still identifies with and operates in relation to a vague but ubiquitous sense of Jewishness" (Lebow 2008, 4) without the advantage of the adequate information.

## **Platform**

In the late afternoon, from a train window, the camera shoots the exterior for a while. We do not see Anna in the frame and while the train is moving, only the sound of its wheels is heard. As underlined before, transport vehicles such as trains and buses constitute the main filmic spaces of many accented film, including *LesRendez-vous d'Anna*. In the film, we generally see Anna on

platforms, or within a train, or at some points, without showing Anna, Akerman shows us the view from a train window. Regarding transitional vehicles in accented films, Naficy points out:

**Claustrophobia pervades the mise-en-scene, shot composition, and often the narratives of films that feature buses and trains as vehicles and symbols of displacement. And since these vehicles travel through countryside and wide-open spaces and between countries, there is always a dialectical relationship in the accented films between the inside closed spaces of the vehicles and the outside open spaces of nature and nation. Inexorably, vehicles provide not only empirical links to geographic places and social groupings but also metaphoric reworkings of notions of traveling, homing, and identity. (Naficy 2001, 257)**

Moreover, in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, Akerman creates this dialectical relation by filming the outer view from the train windows. These “moments of passage” punctuate and accentuate Anna’s ‘in-between’ status and rootlessness further. In the next shot, Anna goes down the stairs of a station as the static camera films her from a fixed angle within the station. She turns left and walks as the static shot shows her from behind. In the next scene, the fixed camera films her from the rear again while she is walking towards a post office at the station. In the next cut, a medium long shot shows Anna in a telephone box. She dials a number and waits for a while, but she does not talk to anyone and leaves the telephone box. She talks to the clerk at the post office and we learn that she has called Italy but the line was busy. Once again, she can not manage to contact someone in Italy. According to Naficy,

**The epistles are not limited to written letters delivered, undelivered, or misdelivered by the postal system. Electronic epistolary media, such as the telephone, answering machine, e-mail, fax, audiocassette, and videocassette, are widely employed, resulting in fragmented, multifocal, multivocal, and emotional narratives. (Naficy 2001, 104)**

Based on Naficy’s argument, I believe that this film is also an epistle that includes electronic epistolary media such as the telephone and answering machine, as we will see throughout the film. Juxtaposed to the radio which belongs to times of war as the medium of propaganda of the nation states, these electronic media, especially the answering machine, refer to times of mobility, not due to wars but due to modernity, and the flow of economics and politics in between the times of nation-states being on the verge of globalisation but not yet totally globalised, otherwise we would moreover see computers, emails, social media conversations and airports.

After leaving the post office, a tracking shot follows her until she goes up the stairs to the platforms. While she is walking up the stairs, a static long shot shows her from her rear, and we see a woman climbing up the stairs to catch up with Anna. Thus, she encounters Ida (Magali Noël), one of her mother’s close friends and a Polish Jew, who has returned to Germany after a

period of exile in Belgium for 25 years after the war. They start talking about Ida's life in Germany, while this time a medium shot is used to exhibit their conversation from a closer point. Anna asks Ida about her life in Germany. Ida says "Yes we've got used to living here (Germany). The stagnation isn't as bad as in Belgium. Everyone is in pursuit of her daily bread. There is no knowing. And also, I can speak

German here. I couldn't get used to French even if I had stayed for 25 years in Belgium. I feel like I have never left Germany. No one should be living in the past. Also, we no longer have anybody there. Most of them died, the rest are scattered here and there. The only bad side of it is that all of our friends are there. Fortunately we met a couple that had come from Belgium, we sometimes get together." Anna asks "Is your German that good? I was thinking that you were Polish." Ida says that "I can't speak it very well but I manage". While Anna has a smiling expression on her face in the beginning, gradually she becomes serious as Ida is talking. During this short conversation on the stairs at the station, Ida has an emotional and delicate tone of voice, as if they are trying to adapt to their new life in Germany and she is trying to forget the bad memories of the past. Apparently, during wartime they were forced to migrate from Germany to Belgium due to their Jewish identity, however again Akerman excludes any direct reference to Jews or the camps; "no one should be living in the past" is the only reference to the Nazis and Jewish identity.

One of the latest studies focusing on the integration processes of German Jews in Germany and German Jews in Israel reveals that the Holocaust still exists in the minds of German-Jewish people who live in Germany; nevertheless, this does not deter them from integrating their Jewish and German identifications (Hochman and Heilbrunn 2016, 119). Also, while some of these interviewees state that there are clear boundaries between their two identities and that these boundaries are impermeable, some of them say that these boundaries are subjectively determined and linked to the Holocaust. After all, the interviewees assert that German Jews' need for drawing a line between the two identities is a result of the cultural trauma that stemmed from the Holocaust. Ida's familiarity with German -at a level that she cannot speak it but can understand it- may be considered as her semi-integration into Germany, and implies her in-betweenness after she has lived in Belgium for many years.

In the next scene, a frontal camera shot shows them on the platform, walking towards the camera. When they stop, Ida asks Anna if she is writing to her mother. It is revealed that Anna and her

mother correspond with each other. Anna says “Her letters are always the same, and I always say that “Everything is fine”. Someone that saw her in Brussels told me that she had backaches and she was very tired and still smoking in spite of her age.

Apart from that, she was good.” As the film is highly self-reflexive, it is inevitable to look at Anna’s relationship with her mother independently of Akerman and her mother’s. In Akerman’s epistolarily structured autobiographical documentary *News from Home*, Akerman reads out her mother’s longing letters in an indifferent, flattened tone that reveals her distanced mood. Similarly, the response Anna gives Ida about her mother also suggests a kind of indifference, a weariness. Also, in *News from Home*, Akerman’s mother talks about her health problems in the same way. Finally, Ida’s words, “I received a letter from her, she wrote that she was thinking about you very much” is also another reference to Akerman’s mother who is fond of her daughter as we are familiar with from *News from Home*. The contents of the correspondence between Anna and her mother, along with that of Ida and Anna’s mother directly refer to Akerman and her mother’s own relationship; and all these self-reflexive ingredients in the film are the features of epistolarily structured accented films (Naficy 2001). Above all, the film is driven by series of information transfers and in this sense, epistolarity acts as a very significant tool. For example, Ida tells Anna that her mother has missed her very much, we do not see the direct speech of the mother to her daughter as in traditional narratives. Rather, both Anna and the audience learn the news and stories via recounting.

While they are still on the platform, Ida hears the announcements in German, which tells Anna that the Brussels train has been delayed for half an hour. Anna, smilingly, says that she has also understood the announcement. This issue of language, and stress on multilinguality, are repetitively emphasised throughout the film and it is one of the other typical characteristics of the epistolary form. This multilinguality is a natural consequence of the dispersion of diasporic and exilic communities around Europe. Hamid Naficy describes epistolary films as “oral and acoustic texts” in his book and he uses the term, “postal” orality in the meaning of post-oral, postwritten, postprint, post-Third World, postcolonial, and postmodern (Naficy 2001, 120). He claims that “this ‘postal’ orality in epistolary films is "driven by such factors as the filmmakers’ national origins and current national status and by their films’ multilingualism, their specific inscription of human speech and voice, and their epistolary structures and contents” (Naficy 2001, 120).

As they are standing on the platform, Anna tells Ida that she is hungry. They turn their back to the

static camera and head towards the stairs. At that moment, a group of uniformed men are noticed in the frame. I believe that, similar to the visuals and sounds of the trains, Akerman uses the visuals of these soldiers as symbols of the lasting effects of the war on Europe.

Next, the camera cuts to a tracking shot as they are walking in the station. Anna states that she has to make a call and once again, the matter of telephones comes up. As an epistolary communication form, phone conversations also involve the sense of absence which is peculiar to letter exchange (Altman 1982, 134). In Anna's case, this sense of absence is doubled because of the failed attempt at making the phone call, and it contributes to the thematic structure as the repeated miscommunication amplifies Anna's loneliness. Besides, if Anna can make this call, it will be possible for the viewer to receive some information about her feelings or relationships, but Akerman deliberately obstructs Anna's self-expression and positions her as an observer, a listener to the stories.

In the next scene, we see them entering the station restaurant where some of the tables are occupied. Inside the restaurant, they stand in front of a table and Anna looks at the half-eaten and discarded plates on the table discontentedly and changes her mind and says that she is not hungry any more. Here, I would like to point out that from the beginning of the film, Anna has an issue with food. As may be remembered, she attempts to eat food from a guest's tray at the hotel in Essen, but then she throws the food onto the plate with a look of distaste. When she goes to Heinrich's house, according to what Heinrich says, Anna does not eat much there. She explains the reason as "There was too much food and I was not hungry". And finally, when she is with Ida, she loses her appetite and decides not to eat. I think Anna's demeanour is linked to various reasons. First, this can be commented on as German food symbolises Anna's displeasure with both German culture, in consideration of Germany's attitude towards Jewish people during World War II. As Margulies points out, Akerman -referring the time she spent in Germany when she was looking for a site for her film- felt that "the food, the German language were familiar" to her, but she felt towards Germany "a sort of rejection" (quoted by Margulies 1999, 62). On the other hand, Anna's ambivalent situation about the food can remind the viewer of the relationship that Naficy establishes between the epistolary form and orality in his book (Naficy 2001, 113). According to him, in *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* Julie tries to compensate for her inability to write by eating obsessively. Extending this argument, it can be said that Anna also tries to compensate for her inability to talk to her girlfriend in Italy or her miscommunication with other by eating food,

though she loses her appetite every time. Above all, disgusting food has another meaning too: Food means transubstantiation if it is enjoyed, but in Anna's case she cannot swallow, so it is like bulimia -hoarding or stealing food is one of the symptoms of bulimia- or other kinds of eating disorders, of which the explanations in her case are not only Jewish trauma but her trauma as a woman/lesbian.

Ida suggests that Anna return to the platform in case the train arrives, and they go up the stairs. In the next shot, we see them sitting side by side on the platform in the evening light. At this point, I would like to mention the composition of the shot. While Anna is listening to her interlocutors, she seems to express both concern but also a distant sense of courtesy, and Akerman creates this ambivalence through the "skewed frontality in relation to the camera" which creates a distance (Margulies 1996, 155). At other moments, while the characters are face to face, their bodies are symmetrically positioned in the shot so they are totally or partly turned to the front, thus whatever the directness of their attention, "they create a strong sense of a third, crucial axis -that of the camera" (Margulies 1996, 155). Also Akerman's shooting style makes the spectators the addressees of the speech. A similar kind of skewed frontality is also used in one of Akerman's most favourite film, *Gertrud* (Dreyer 1964). *Gertrud* also involves some encounters, the confrontations of a woman with her husband, ex-lover and current lover and a friend; and the contents of the conversations are mournful, consisting complaints and disappointments of the parts about the past. When they are talking, their bodies are also turned to camera as in Anna's encounters. This kind of a listening posture leaves the viewer with the burden of the speeches in both of these films.

Ida starts a long monologue which is replete with complaints and judgements as she talks to Anna about marital issues and traditional values, while Anna listens to her in silence, and neither reacts nor makes any comment. She says:

**Being an artist is a great thing. I wanted that, too. I used to paint well when I was young. You are very lucky. You are traveling everywhere. I don't want to put my nose in your business, but if there isn't anybody in your life, you know, my son is still waiting for you. I am asking for the last time. Will you marry with my son? Don't say it's over. You still write to each other. Why are you writing if you don't love each other? Let the authors write. Don't do the same as the last time. You said yes and then you disappeared. No one heard from you for months. If you didn't want to, why did you say yes? And, it was not only once, it was twice. Anyway, forget it. Bygones are bygones. But, breaking off an engagement twice, I have never heard anything like that. Don't do anything like that. Without making any explanation.. Don't you want a child?**

Ida's opinions of Anna's past actions are full of complaints and almost accusatory. Though she starts her speech as if she really respects Anna's job, soon afterwards her real thoughts about Anna are revealed. As in several scenes of the film, the sounds of trains are heard in the background while Ida is talking. Anna responds to Ida's question about the child as "Yes" when Ida expects an answer from her, however Ida continues her speech. She talks about how Anna's parents would be happy if Anna has children, the difficulties of being a single woman without children and she insistently pushes her to get married and says "I hope that it is not too late when you make your decision". Anna, who is obliged to say something, promises that she will think about Ida's words and will write to her son. Throughout her monologue, Ida continually uses intimidating expressions emphasising the impossibility of being a woman alone. Referring to the past times, the times when she met her husband, she says "In the past, women were begging to find a husband. They were anxious about not being found desirable. But now.. .We will end up badly. Very bad." She also recounts how the war changed her husband who was so gentle once upon a time -she says that she was very proud when she was walking by his side -but he changed and became an angry man after the war. Also she says that her husband blames her for "what happened" and she acknowledges him to be right; but adds that they worked hard and became rich so they cannot complain after all. When she is talking about her elder son, who is a "real scientist, a professor" living in the United States, she states that he never comes to Germany to visit his parents, so they visit him. Towards the end of her prosaic talk she recapitulates the same things regarding the necessity of Anna's marriage and says that her younger son is a smart, good man and would make Anna happy, they would have children, also they would not face any unpleasant surprises since they have known each other from childhood. She ends her words by saying, "If you have no time, I would take care of them. I know all about babysitting."

Throughout this long monologue, Ida refers to many issues, including the Nazi past, marriage and promises, countries and distances; a list of events which are not shown but instead told about. Like Heinrich, Ida is also another storyteller that combines the past of Europe with her personal issues. This act of storytelling during each encounter, reinforces the film's epistolary mode. Considering the accumulative structure of the narrative, it can be said that through these storytellers, Akerman tries to fill in what is left as a void by her mother since she is silent about the past. As indicated before, for Akerman's mother, the event, the Holocaust, was experienced, but the story of the trauma has kind of evaporated; in Anna's case, stories are told but spaces and

events are removed. As will be seen in the following scenes of the film, Anna's next interlocutors will also narrate their lives and stories, whereas the events will not be shown. On the other hand, like Heinrich, Ida is another character that is immersed in the epistolary forms' main themes such as nostalgia, despair and exile.

Ida's words "We will end up badly. Very bad..." are also an indicator of the pessimism of the era. With respect to the Nazi past, once again the war becomes the source of an anguished family story, like Heinrich's father's death at Stalingrad or his best friend's expulsion from the school he had worked in; on the other hand, Akerman makes no direct reference to Jewish identity or the camps again. Instead, Ida's statements about her husband's character change or her son's reluctance about coming back to Germany implicitly reflect the effects of the trauma on her family. We assume that Ida's husband is not Jewish, because she says that "He blames me for what happened." Rather than an explicit enunciation, her "litany of complaints, soft recriminations, all related to the Jewish obsession with having a family" (Margulies 1999, 64) gives Ida a "more accurate Jewish identity card" (Margulies 1999, 64). Indeed Ida's insistent words glorifying marriage and her approach to the existence of a single woman without a child are the traditional values derived from both a Jewish identity and a conservative patriarchal system. For her, maternity and marriage are the prerequisites of being a real woman and being a single woman is an inferior situation for a woman, thus she engenders a "false polarity" like "childless woman and the mother" (Rich 1986, 250), as Adrienne Rich mentions in the book chapter "Motherhood and Daughterhood". On the other hand, considering the fact that "all our mothers teach us is what they have learned in the crucible of sexism" (Arcana 1979, 70), Ida's advice is also the result of the socio-cultural system that her generation is shaped within.

As Luce Irigaray also claims, sociopolitical conditions affect how we use our selfpresentation measures. She says "The language of the female subject was thus reduced to the minimum" especially after children start school (Irigaray 1994, 48). In this regard, Ida's whole speech can also be reduced to a praising of domesticity, in addition to some references to the war's personal effects. On the other hand, as in the dialogue with Heinrich, Anna gives almost no response to her, she preserves her distance as can be deduced from her body language. In her book, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'*, Chloe Taylor discusses Foucault's thoughts on the positive effects of silence and how he presents silence "as a means to resist the disciplinary incitements to confessional discourse under

conditions of coercion” (Taylor 2008, 194). On the other hand, during Ida’s speech, the increasing noise of the trains in the background also further reinforces both her speech’s contents about the war, countries, and distances, and also signals Anna’s detachment from all the context, her transitional existence. Finally, both in Ida’s monologue and the other interlocutors’ speeches, the “uneven, unilateral distribution of address...creates a comically jarring effect” and causes the “defamiliarisation of speech” (Schmid 2010, 44). Also Ida’s parroting of the same subjects -about marriage and her son, for example- or her expletive, redundant statements such as “while we had a servant, my husband was shouting at her, but after we relieved her of her duty, he started yelling at me...” contribute to this defamiliarisation. As Margulies says, “Simultaneously engaging and defamiliarizing the spectator, Akerman's minimalism creates a distance that can only be characterized as ‘disquietingly theatrical’” (Margulies 1996, 60).

From the feminist perspective, Anna’s unwillingness to have a child also intersects with Akerman’s own life. As part of a political and historical feminism in the 70s and 80s, the next generations preferred to remain childless and defended abortion. Similarly, both the choices of Akerman and those of her characters, Jeanne Dielman and Anna are linked to these historical processes of feminism. It is not merely about biological processes, but also Akerman -Anna- prevents the continuation of her line as a feminist stance. Though Anna does not give a reason and she just tells Heinrich that she would have had two kids named Judith and Rebecca, but this could not happen; I think that the reason for her childlessness is a resistance to the existing patriarchal system praising maternity and marriage. In “Mothers and Daughters”, Marianne Hirsch discusses the three tendencies - Freudian, Lacanian and Jungian- in feminist psychoanalytic studies about mother- daughter relationships. In her article, she cites Dorothy Dinnerstein’s arguments which claim that maternal omnipotence is a big danger for the system and “woman is the ‘other’ only because she is the ‘mother’ (Hirsch 1981, 207). Though I also agree with this argument, being a single, childless, urban woman is another threat to the domestic, patriarchal order, especially for the traditional Jewish culture and makes her “the other”. Indeed, Anna’s choice apparently disturbs Ida, who is a traditional Jewish woman from the previous generation. I think her disturbance is not only related to the failed engagement of Anna and her son: Anna’s way of being is the main threat to that culture of patriarchy.

In the next scene, Anna’s train is at the platform, and Anna and Ida stand there, without talking. They look at the train, while Anna is ready to leave soon. In the meantime, a group of uniformed

men, most probably the soldiers that we saw earlier, get on the train in a hurry. Thus, for a second time Akerman shows them, as a symbol, as evocatory agents of the war, addressing the continuing memories and effects of the war on post-war Europe. Anna gets on the train, and as she is still on the stairs of the train, they look at each other for a while and Anna says “Do whatever you want but don’t be sad. Everything will be fine.” The train departs. Ida turns her back and walks in the opposite direction of Anna’s train and the static camera shoots her from behind as she gradually moves away from the camera.

After the meeting with Ida in Cologne, Anna continues her journey to arrive in Brussels and meet with her mother. Through each encounter, it becomes more apparent that her journey is not merely a physical journey, it is also a social and psychological journey. Regarding “contemporary exiles and diasporas”, Naficy points out:

**Their deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys take a number of forms, and they cross many borders—not only physical and geographic but also psychological, metaphorical, social, and cultural borders. (Naficy 2001, 222)**

Indeed, with every interlocutor, she faces both the trauma of the past and her deterritorialized status, and also the social and cultural forces that are applied to a woman in her daily life.

## **Train**

In the next scene, it is nighttime and a chiaroscuro shot shows Anna in her seat on the train. She seems very abstracted and pale. With a fixed expression on her face, she is smoking without blinking her eyes. A man enters her compartment, we do not see his face, and soon his off-screen voice says that smoking is forbidden there. Anna looks at him for a moment and then puts out her cigarette. After a few seconds, she closes her eyes. At that moment, an official opens the door of the compartment, the lights are turned on, and she opens her eyes. He asks for her passport or identity card, Anna finds her passport in her bag and gives it to him without raising her head to look at him. After the encounter with Ida in Cologne, her weariness is explicitly obvious. The official looks at the passport and gives it back to Anna, he closes the door and the compartment goes dark again.

In the following shot, she goes out of her own compartment and starts walking down the corridor of the train with her back to the camera. She walks the whole length of the train from First Class

to Economy to Second Class. While she is walking, she looks into the crowded compartments, full of sleeping people. There are also people standing in the corridors. Then at one point, she tries to walk further but after trying to squeeze between some men standing in the corridor, she turns back. The camera shows her face which expresses the fact that she is suffocating because of this crowd. This whole scene can be interpreted as a reference to the mass movements of crowds during World War II; moreover years later Akerman documented the forced movements of the masses in her experimental documentary film *D'Est*, too. Following this, we see Anna in the empty corridor, standing by a window. She is back in her own carriage. She closes the window and looks outside while a fixed long shot frames her in the corridor. Soon afterwards, a man -the man in her compartment- comes out of the compartment and stands just behind her. The train stops, and while they are looking at the workers outside, the stranger (Hanns Zischler) starts talking in the off-screen. He says "They are re-assembling the train." Anna briefly says "Yes", in a cold and toneless voice. As the camera continues showing the workers who are carrying some equipment, he asks Anna where she is going and Anna says that she is going to Paris via Brussels.

Then, a medium close up shows them from the back, while they are still standing at the window. This time, the man is not behind Anna, he stands just next to her. He takes his cigarette box from his pocket and offers one to Anna. At one of the stations, the train stops again. As they are facing with their backs to the camera, side by side at the window, the man continues saying some expletive things such as "The train is leaving" and again Anna only says "Yes." The train departs. There is a moment of silence. Naficy claims that the silence of the characters in epistolary films can be a sign of the difficulty of selfexpression in exile (Naficy 2001, 115). Next, a fixed long shot shows them at one end of the corridor again, as in the beginning. This time, the man is standing one step behind her. They both look at out of the window silently, and only the sound of the train is heard. Next, a medium close up from the side shows Anna as she stares out. She opens the window, and once again the camera shows the outside - the empty platforms and railroads - in the darkness of the night. The name "Welkenraert," a municipality in Wallonia in the province of Liege, Belgium, will appear on the station name sign soon. Welkenraert is composed of two districts, Henri-Chapelle and Welkenraedt; and American soldiers who lost their lives in World War II are buried in Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery and Memorial.

I would like to underline that, during the film, Akerman does not show us the

cities/countries/spaces (except the city traffic in the Paris streets towards the end of the film) nor does she present any map, instead showing us the names of the cities on name signs on train platforms, or we generally hear the names of the destinations in Anna's own voice. Thus, Akerman's own mapping, which involves a lot of layers such as the Holocaust, the mother-daughter relationship, personal stories of these people of the postwar, and Anna's own story, is done verbally. She establishes a vocal topography through the storytelling and also she uses some signboards as contributors to this verbal delivery.

Once the train departs, Anna and the man stand side by side again. Anna seems lost in her own world, she looks like she is not even there. The man turns and leans, his back to the window, in the opposite direction of Anna. He also looks impassive like Anna. Then, in a medium close up shot, they both look out and the camera shows a few people on the platform.

The train stops at one of the stations again, and when it moves, this time a medium close up frames Anna from the back, as she is looking outside, and the man starts talking in the off-screen. He asks "Do you know Brussels?". Anna says "I was born there. I lived there for 20 years." She closes the window. Anna's fleeting gestures -opening, closing and reopening the window- evince her uneasiness during her journey. The man continues talking and says "Two years ago, I stayed there for one week. I loved it. Are you still living there?" Anna states that she left there eight years ago. She answers his questions coldly and unwillingly. He says "It's a pity. Is there any possibility you might know a few friends of mine who have been living there? In Vanderlindens..." Anna repeats the word "Vanderlindens" a few more times as if she is trying to remember. When I made a search to find out where "Vanderlindens" is, I could not find a place like that but there is a Belgian historian named Herman Vander Linden who lived between 1868 and 1956 and worked as a professor at the University of Liege in Belgium. During World War II, one of his sons was arrested for being a member of the Resistance and died in a German concentration camp in 1942. Presumably, Akerman is referring to this traumatic story.

She turns her back to the camera as she is still trying to remember Vanderlindens and looks preoccupied with her thoughts. Without looking at the stranger, she asks "Are there any furniture stores there?". The man laughs slightly and says that there aren't. "Then I don't know.", Anna says. During all these moments, her eyes are fixed on a stable point and she looks totally unexpressive. The man says "They say that Belgium is a country of wealth." Slightly smiling and

without looking at the man, Anna says, “They say so.” He asks her where she is living and Anna says “Paris”. We learn that the man is also going to Paris, he says that “It is said France is a country of freedoms” and Anna once again, with an elusive smile on her face, says “They say so”. These recurring expressions are used frequently in the film, as in Ida’s speech, or in Akerman’s other films as well. In *News from Home*, Akerman’s mother reiterates the same expressions, such as “Why are you writing back so late? Please write more often.” Akerman uses these platitudes deliberately as she prefers to finish the verbal statements “as a bla, bla, bla, as psalmody” (quoted by Margulies 1996, 192-193), and this narrational choice indicates that both her Jewish identity and modernist tendencies are intertwined with each other in her work (Margulies 1996, 193). On the other hand, Anna’s reactions, her hopeless and sceptical attitude while saying “They say so...” is also a common characteristic of post-war European people, going through an existential malaise after the war; and is caused by the impossibility of changing the wounded and tragic past of Europe. The man says “Maybe I can be happy there” and Anna says “Maybe.” Despite the depressive atmosphere of a traumatised Europe, he is still seeking happiness, trying to find a new identity for himself, and this is also a familiar notion among these post-war European people.

From this moment on, the stranger talks in the off-screen. Now, the camera angle changes and a medium close up shows him from the side as he tells Anna that he is from Berlin and lived in Hamburg because there is a harbor there. Anna, in the off-screen space, tells him that his French is very good. Again Anna brings up the language issue, as in the encounter with Ida. He tells her that he always wanted go to France and says “The French knew freedom in their hearts. So I learnt their language and I even fixed my accent.”

A medium shot shows both of them again as they are standing in the corridor, side by side, without looking at each other and with their backs to the window. During all this conversation - or rather, monologue -, they almost never look at each other’s eyes or faces. They both seem to be in their own worlds. The attitude of the man, his body language and the way he is talking, register his quite melancholic mood. He says, “I am staying at the Grands Hommes Hotel. Do you know it?” This time he looks at Anna, who does not look at him and she says she does not. After a short silence between them, he says “I can’t speak French as well as you yet” and Anna replies by saying that she too cannot speak it that well. Another emphasis on language enhances the film’s accented quality further. In a frontal medium close up shot which presents them side by

side, he says:

**After I left Hamburg, I headed for South America. I was dreaming about justice maybe. Extraordinary things...I wandered country-by-country. Bolivia, Brazil, everywhere. A weird climate. Hot and humid. For days, day and night, I traveled without stopping. I don't remember much. Guns, footsteps, noises, smells, a few words in Spanish.. I met with a woman there.. This is the sixth country I have been to. This time it will be the right place. I am sure of this.**

He looks at Anna who has a soft expression on her face. He says "Lately I was in Greece, on an island, almost alone." At this, probably for the first time, Anna looks at the man, in a puzzled and surprised way. The man continues: "Everything was fine for a while. Then, I went back to Germany, my home country. However I couldn't make it there either. France came to my mind. Maybe I can meet a woman there who loves me and I can also love her." After these words, they stay silent for a while. Though he says nothing explicitly, it can be understood that he is looking for the chance to be with Anna. Like Heinrich and Ida, he loads some patriarchal expectations on her, however Anna repulses these expectations and preserves her "uncompromising celibacy" (Schmid 2010, 57) in a polite and silent manner. As Taylor also underlines in *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault*, Foucault regards silence as a better method than confessional exchanges in some situations and a tool of protecting yourself from pressure (Taylor 2008, 194-195). In Anna's case silence is partly troubling, it creates a miscommunication between Anna and others, but also it is a very effective defensive measure for her. Besides, most probably it is the only option in the face of the absurdity of the addressers' speeches and the excessiveness of their expectations. For instance, Heinrich complains over much about Anna's distance, even though they have known each other for a very short time. A stranger on the train instantly imagines that Anna can love him. While Anna seems the one who is odd, "mutant" in this story at first glance, soon it is revealed that her interlocutors who lead their lives in a relatively "normal" way and expect "ordinary" things from her, are much more bizarre than her. On the other hand, the use of the body is very significant in the film. Akerman's work is original because she shows how bodily behaviour can be "the sign of states of body particular to the female character", while men talk about society, the world around them, the part they get to play in their own lives, the history they bring with them (Deleuze 1989, 196).

On the other hand, the stranger's entire speech can be considered as the projection of the existential crisis of the Europeans. The man, as a Berliner who has both lived in Hamburg and visited various places such as South America, and lastly Greece, says that he could not find what

he is looking for and says that France, “country of freedom”, is his last hope. From the epistolary perspective, he is again another exiled, lonely, isolated character in the story and though he is in search of a new identity, a new land that would make him happy, his monologue reflects his despair at bottom. In addition, Akerman shows none of his experiences visually as in the other encounters, rather, it is verbal delivery in the form of monologue which becomes the only source of information.

As a deterritorialised wanderer that has no real connection with any land, Anna seems totally indifferent to all his hopes about the land. She turns and looks out and says “We are about to arrive in Brussels”. Both look outside. Once again, we see the outside world from the window. The train stops at Brussel-Noord station. Anna walks along the corridor while the fixed camera shows her from behind. In the shot, she is in the toilet, looking at herself in the mirror and drying her hands. After that, a medium shot shows the stranger as he leans on the train window and looks outside. Anna comes and stands behind him. They stand silently. The noise of the train is the only sound at that moment. He does not turn and look at her, he goes on looking out. Once again, camera shows the world outside and the platforms. The train arrives at Brussel-Centraal station, it stops and we see the name sign. Then, it departs again. In these moments, the camera points outside, showing empty platforms and stations in the darkness of the night. It shoots Anna and the man for a moment, right after, then it turns to the outside again. At the next station, Brussel-Zuid, Anna gets off the train. She looks around for a moment, then she turns right. A tracking shot follows her walking slowly down the platform. The man, who is still standing at the window waves his hand, Anna looks at him for a second and she continues walking, while the train is still at the platform. She goes down the stairs.

Anna’s journey can be seen as a self-exploration and an identity journey for her as she moves through the history of the war and her own personal past. Moreover, selfexploration is one of the other qualities of epistolary films, according to Naficy. He states that during exile, epistolarity becomes a significant tool for self-discovery and self- narrativisation, for this reason a large number of epistolaries, covering Mekas' 1976 film *Lost, Lost, Lost*, are autobiographical or include components of autobiography and diary film (Naficy 2001, 104-105). On the other hand, Anna’s identity journey fails as she gradually gets worn down because of the heaviness of all the encounters, personal and historical stories that are told to her and the expectations of her interlocutors. I think this construction of a failed search for identity in the film is especially

marked by her failure to make a connection with Italy.

### **Encounter with the mother**

In the empty station in Brussels, for a few seconds the camera follows Anna from the back, then she stops. A woman (Lea Massari) with a headscarf on is standing there. Since she is quite a distance from Anna and the camera, we cannot see her face clearly. She seems to be looking for someone. A medium shot shows Anna's face, as she frozenly looks at this woman. Then, she smiles, very slightly. Next, a static, medium long shot frames Anna from behind again, and we see that the woman -her mother- is also looking at Anna this time. After facing each other for a while, they walk towards each other and hug. In this silent moment of the encounter, Akerman's static, distanced camera shows them talking for a few seconds, however we do not see their faces, or facial expressions, and we do not hear anything. Yet, there is an indication that two of them have not seen each other for a long while. Together they leave and the camera frames the empty station for a few seconds.

Before examining Anna's encounter with her mother, I would like to look at the relationship between Akerman and her mother, and how this intimacy affected her work. As Brenda Longfellow says, the "recurring phantasmatic core" of the art of Akerman "lies in the desire to reconstitute the image of the mother, the voice of the mother" (Longfellow 1989, 73). Indeed Akerman herself states that "I want to film in order to understand. What are you going there for, someone asked?... I'll find out when I get there...It's always your mother and father you run into on a journey" (quoted by Bruno 2007, 144). It would not be wrong to say that she is searching for her mother in her art, and actually all of her work is linked to her family but especially her mother, at a conscious or unconscious level; explicitly or implicitly. When we look at her filmography, it can be said that she is doing a jigsaw puzzle, and all her films are parts of this puzzle in respect of both their forms and genres. Some of them are documentary, the others are more avant-garde, experimental, some of them are more narrative oriented, but in the end, all of them are creating a Geist, establishing a spirit together. According to Lacan, language is "the name of the father" (Lacan 1993), it goes beyond the silence of the mother and her materiality too. In Akerman's case, even though her father is alive, he is not present. Akerman tries to explore herself, essentially through her mother's past. However, it is impossible for a mother to be able to speak, as speech is the field of the symbolic, man. As French writer Hélène Cixous states in her article "The Laugh of Medusa": "It is by writing, from and toward

women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence” (Cixous 1976, 881). As Cixous says, writing, letters, documents can substitute for the silence of the woman. In *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, Akerman’s father’s image is not present, indeed in all her films he remains in the background. In her films, Akerman tries to establish the missing language of the father through her mother. She does this via letters, or in this film through the stories of each interlocutor, which constitute a palimpsestic memory together, because this is the only way for her to build a memory, to find herself. Moreover, we can say that her whole oeuvre has a palimpsestic narrative structure. As formerly indicated, although their genres, their approaches change, in all her films, she is trying to construct her identity, deduce her own story. Within this context, her relationship with her mother is very significant for both this film and her cinema in general.

From another point of view, Akerman’s childlessness also makes her mother’s experiences much more significant for her. In order to establish an identity, to construct herself, she needs her mother’s past. In her article “Mothers and Daughters”, Marianne Hirsch mentions Jung’s view that every woman reaches the past through her mother and the future through her daughter; being conscious of these connections creates a sense that her life spans generations (Hirsch 1981, 209), but in Akerman’s case, since she has no children, she is mostly engaged in her mother’s life and memories, the past. This film and all the encounters in it actually relate to Anna -Akerman- and her relationship with her mother, as mentioned. Through all of the encounters, Anna is facing up to her mother’s past. Besides, Anna/Akerman is a Jewish woman and when it is considered that Jewish identity is matrilineal, this film’s relation with memory is closely linked to the fact that identity is received from the mother.

If we return to the analysis, in the next scene, we see them looking for a table for themselves in an almost empty restaurant at the station. Then they find a table and a fixed, long shot shows them sitting side by side. A waiter comes up to them, and Anna and her mother say something inaudible. Next, a medium shot films them from a closer angle. As in the scene with Ida and Anna sitting together on the platform, a skewed frontal position is again taken here. After glancing at Anna for a second, her mother talks first and says “You’ve become a real woman.” There is a slight sadness in her eyes. Anna smiles and says “I have been so, for a long time”. Her mother says “Blonde and pale.. .You are very beautiful.” As in the previous encounters, Anna

does not look her mother in the eyes. With an ambiguous smile on her face, she looks slightly down or away. Her mother continues “Your eyes are like my mother’s.. .Look at me.” Anna raises her hand and looks into her mother’s eyes, and she says “If only I was like you.” Then, her mother continues and says that she has missed her and she has no one to talk to. When Anna says, “But you weren’t talking to me”, she behaves as if she does not understand what Anna is saying, but when Anna repeats her words, she says, “Even so, you were there”. As in the letters Akerman’s mother wrote to her in *News from Home*, Anna’s mother - Akerman’s mother - talks to her daughter in a reproachful way. In *News from Home*, there was another mother who misses her daughter very much and continually complains about the short letters from her daughter, asks her to write more and states that she actually wants Akerman to be with her in Belgium. In both of these two films, the mother seems to be keeping herself alive through her daughter and when the daughter leaves, she no longer finds herself (Irigaray 1981, 64-65).

Next, a medium close up shows only Anna in the on-screen space. She asks about how her father and sister are. Her mother’s voice in the off-screen says “Your sister is still a big child. Your father is not as strong as in the past but he manages. He owns me at least.” Anna, as usual, gives a short answer and just says “Sure.” Both the intimacy and the distance between them are felt at these moments. Compared with the previous three encounters, she seems to be listening in a more “alive” way this time, with her emotions. However, her “dense, suggestive opacity that cannot be penetrated” is present even with her mother (Bergstrom 1999, 101).

When her mother asks how she is, she tells her that she is a bit tired because of traveling too much. Her mother, in a touching voice, replies “Isn’t there anyone that takes care of you?”. All these conversations again remind the viewer of *News from Home*. There, similarly Akerman’s mother talks about family issues, her husband’s health problems, Akerman’s sister and so on. Through these intertextual references, the autobiographical style of *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* becomes more apparent. After Anna’s words, her mother suggests they go home together, but Anna wants to stay there some more. When her mother says that they cannot sleep there, she offers to go to a hotel.

In *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, along with the other transitional spaces such as the bar, restaurants, and train stations, the most significant transitional space in the film is undoubtedly hotels. Throughout the film, if Anna is not in a train station, we see her in hotel rooms and even when

she meets her mother, she does not want to go home. This is directly linked with her nomadic and displaced identity, because she - Akerman - has no feelings of possession, of property or land. She is a permanent traveler and a nomadic woman, who spends her life in hotels, stations, and on the road, as the film reveals from the beginning. She is an “in-between” character, she can not exist within a place like home and this is a very existentialist way to denote presence. This existentialist status is a common fact among the post-war generation who have fears, doubts and anxiety about the past and about modernity. On the other hand, her mother -Akerman’s mother- who immediately accepts her daughter’s suggestion without questioning it, also has a nomadic identity, she is also rootless. Her nomadicity stems from her migration from Poland to Belgium and then her forced exile from Belgium to Auschwitz in the past.

Another Akerman film, her silent documentary *Hotel Monterey*, also consists of shots of a Manhattan hotel, and for an hour she frames each detail of the hotel in this documentary. Above all, property coincides with the patriarchal system. Home is the place where the family grows and nurtures. Anna spends her life in hotels, in trains and at stations, because she does not feel part of this patriarchal system. According to the dominant perception, home is the field of domesticity and domestication, and it is the area specific to woman (Bruno 2007, 103). Anna is apparently outside this domestically framed world both physically and mentally. She is a character who silently rejects the values of the whole traditional patriarchal order. She is a single, Jewish woman without children, an artist, a wanderer and she has a lesbian relationship as will be revealed soon; and one way or another she protects her autonomy in spite of all the expectations of her interlocutors. Thus, being in these transitional spaces is a very natural consequence of Anna’s feminist, exilic and queer identity.

Following the scene in which Anna’s mother agrees to stay in a hotel, a medium close up shows the mother is on-screen this time. She says that “Your father’ll worry. But he’s probably asleep and he doesn’t wake up. He spent a tiring day as usual.” While she is saying these words she smiles, but a continual sadness is felt from her voice and gestures. When Anna tries to learn about her situation, she sighs and starts as follows:

**I don’t like to talk about these kinds of things but you can understand from now on. No, things are not going well. The stagnation affected us badly. It affected everyone, but we are losing everything we have earned in 30 years. Sometimes you wonder if is it really worth it. Your father is very demoralized. For a moment, he says that everything passes, we should put up with it but later he asks ‘What’s the point?..’ I am trying to strengthen his belief. I smile at him. Sometimes it works but sometimes he doesn’t even notice it.**

At this moment, we see that is Anna listening to her carefully and seriously. She continues and says “He becomes lost in thought. What is he thinking, God knows...How is Germany these days?” Anna smiles and says “There are curtains everywhere and tulips on every table. And as one of my friends says, ‘it’s full of Germans’.”

Anna smilingly says these words, but her words and gestures hint at the fact that she is totally alien to Germany and distant towards the country. In the off-screen, her mother says “That’s right. Full of Germans.. I was there 20 years ago.” When the camera turns to the mother again, she has a faraway look on her face, she continues talking and says “Probably now it is full of opportunities.” Anna’s voice is heard and she says “Maybe...I don’t know.” Just as with Heinrich, Ida and the stranger on the Brussels train, the mother's words once again echo the pessimism which has arisen from the post-war. Her dejected gestures and voice project the effects of both the anguished memories of exile and the current economic situation of the family after the war. From the epistolary perspective, again there is an exilic narrator who is in despair at the trauma of the past and also the current conditions. Additionally, as in the other encounters, Akerman gives information about the family and their trauma - which seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that is crying out (Caruth 1996, 4) - through the speech of the mother - though it is limited - rather than showing any particular event, or using any flashbacks, or presenting the images of family members, etc. Thus, once again, the transfer of words, storytelling is the only option for both Anna and the viewers to have some limited information about the family and the effects of the war on them.

Anna’s mother says: Anyway...In any case, things will be better. We should be strong and sustain our hopes. You are very successful, the rest is not important at all. (The camera turns to Anna, who is attentively listening to her mother) I follow your career very closely.. I am reading all the newspapers and keeping all the articles. Some of them are in my bag, would you like to see? Anna smiles bashfully, she glances away. Her mother says “They make me feel relieved a bit.” At that moment, Anna says “Mum, you have been in Belgium for a long time, still your accent has not improved.” Thus, as in almost all encounters, the question of language is repeated between Anna and her mother once again. As indicated above, this multilinguality and the emphasis on accent are characteristics of epistolarily structured accented films.

In the next scene, it is nighttime and we see Anna and her mother in the street, looking for a place

to stay and a tracking shot follows them. They pass in front of a few hotels which are side by side. Following this, in a medium long shot we see them at the reception of a small, modest hotel. Anna's mother asks for a room while they are with their backs to the camera, and they stand at the reception desk, talking to the receptionist. He asks "One room?". Anna's mother looks at her daughter for a second and she confirms it. The three of them go up the stairs.

In the following scene, they are in the hotel room and the lights are on. Music is heard in the background. Anna's mother sits on the edge of a double bed and folds some clothes and simultaneously she watches Anna as Anna is standing at the window and looking outside, as in various other scenes of the film. She sits on the bed with her back to both the camera and her mother. She starts taking off her jacket and blouse, meanwhile her mother watches her constantly. When Anna asks her in an infantile way, "Won't you take off your clothes?", her mother says "Let me watch you awhile."

Referring to the intimacy between mother and daughter in Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, News from Home, Je, Tu, Il, Elle* and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, Longfellow states:

**No other cinematographic work, I believe, is so singular in its evocation of the relation between the daughter and mother and in its tracing of an explicitly homosexual economy of narrative and spectatorship ordered by and through this relation. Desire in these films circulates around the maternal body, around the variable presence and absence of the mother, around the enduring gaze of the daughter at the mother. (Longfellow 1989, 74)**

As she also states, Akerman's films suggest "a different economy of desire and subjectivity" which is opposed to the classical Freudian oedipal theory (Longfellow 1989, 74). According to Freud, in the oedipal period, the daughter's love for her mother turns to hatred and resentment, and she transfers her attachment to her father (Hirsch 1981, 205). In Akerman's films -also in her life- we neither feel nor see the traces of this kind of oedipal resentment or hatred from the daughter to the mother; on the contrary, she deeply loves her mother and is also very attached to her, as will be better understood from her last movie, *No Home Movie*, too, but also she would like to differentiate her existence from the mother's and become individuated. Actually, the inner conflict of Akerman's woman characters comes from this ambivalence.

When Anna is taking off her clothes, her mother asks how long it is since they last saw each other and it is revealed that three years has passed since their last meeting. When Anna's mother stresses the length of this period, Anna, in a childish manner, says "Yes but you were always with me." Hereupon, her mother says "Yes, but I can't make it every time." Anna says "Yes, you will

be.” Differently from the other encounters, Anna’s attitude and manner of speaking completely changes when she is with her mother and she almost returns to her infancy. Their codependency, even though Anna occasionally seems indifferent to her, becomes more apparent as the film proceeds.

Anna stands up and says that she has to call Italy. After glancing round the room for a few seconds, Anna’s mother says that there is no telephone in the room, and asks Anna whom she would like to talk with. Throughout the film, as an epistolary medium, the telephone becomes the instrument of desire for Anna (Naficy 2001, 132-133), but like all the other failed call attempts in the film, for the fourth time she is not able to talk to Italy. Regarding the significant role of the phone in epistolary film, Naficy says: “Because of its live ontology and the concomitant immediacy, intimacy, and intensity, the telephone is most susceptible to both epistolary prohibition and transgression” (Naficy 2001, 117). Indeed, the telephone’s simultaneous connection quality makes it a favourable instrument for exilic and nomadic people, and but this communication is also subject to some barriers, as in Anna’s case.

In the off-screen, Anna responds to her mother, and says that she will call one of her girlfriends. Her mother wavers, as if she suspects something. She changes the subject and asks “How is Pierre?” (He is Ida’s son most probably). At that moment Anna, totally naked, comes in shot again, and goes towards the bed and gets into it while her mother is standing up this time. Anna tells her mother, who is in the off-screen, that they do not see each other any more. When she asks the reason, Anna says “I was never with him. He was always waiting for me. One day he got tired of it.”

In the next shot, when the lights are still on, a high angle shot shows them in the bed, side by side and under the covers. Anna, in a childish voice, asks: “Shall I turn off the lights?..” She turns off the lights and her mother says: “All right, tell me”. In the room with chiarascuro lighting, Anna’s confession starts:

**I am always traveling due to my film screenings. I am meeting with all kinds of people. At the end of the day, I am all alone in hotel rooms. For this reason, sometimes I bring someone to my room. But this is always sad and a bit silly at the same time... She came to my hotel to see me because she liked my film. We went out for a drink. She talked about herself, I talked about myself. The bar was closing, we went to another place. We went on chatting, just then that bar also closed. We looked for another place. Everywhere was closed. The city was desolate. We didn’t want to say goodbye. She came to my room. We were tired. We lay on the bed, we continued talking. We started fondling each other. Then**

**we kissed. I don't know how it happened. I felt a kind of nausea. It was a disgusting feeling. It was too much. I got muddled. But we continued kissing. Then everything happened so fast. I let myself go. I felt very good. I couldn't image that it would be like this with a woman. I had no idea. We spent the night together. And weirdly, I thought of you. I told this to her too.**

Her mother asks "What did she say?" Anna says "She laughed". Her mother says, "And then?" Anna says "Nothing. The next day I had to leave." After Anna's words, her mother asks if they saw each other again and Anna says that they didn't but they had talked on the phone.

In his book, Naficy mentions the term, "epistophilia", as a desire for knowing and telling personal and national histories, and he claims that it is a characteristic of epistolaries (Naficy 2001, 105). This epistolary film is completely based on this aspect. Starting with Anna's encounter with Heinrich, Akerman weaves the film around the stories of others.

As in the other confessions in the film, Anna's relationship with a woman is described but not exhibited visually. Thus, along with the mother's statements about familial issues and the economic crisis; Anna's confession about her sexual relationship with a woman contribute to the film's epistolary structure which privileges the discursive over the spectacular. We never see the Italian lover throughout the film.

On the other hand, while Anna stays almost totally silent during all these monologues and acts as a "surrogate spectator" (Higgins 1999, 61), at this point for the first time she speaks about herself and reveals her sexual relationship with a woman to her mother. When considering that "the stories we tell in confession 'make the meaning' of our lives and our selves" (Taylor 2008, 251), Anna's decision both to choose the mother as her confessor and also the contents of the confession are significant. This decision both shows the intimacy between the mother and the daughter and also implies that her lesbian relationship covers an important facet of her life, even though she and her lover could not get together again. As I also stated in the beginning of the analysis, this film is not just a self-exploration journey, but also a feminist story. As Monique Wittig says, "Homosexuality is the desire for one's own sex. But it is also the desire for something else that is not connoted. This desire is resistance to the norm" (Wittig 1979, 114). Indeed, through Anna, the film suggests an alternative love and sexual identity which is contrary to all the traditional, oppressive patriarchal values and desires of Anna's interlocutors. Besides, by interlacing lesbian love and the maternal relationship in the film -Anna says "I thought of you"- Akerman further puts emphasis on strong female bonds which are not possessive (Schmid 2010, 57).

After Anna talks of her sexual relationship, the mother states that she cannot tell this to her husband. When Anna asks her mother if she has loved a woman before, she says that she does not know, she has never thought about this before. Hamid Naficy discusses another epistolary film, Mona Hatoum's 1988 *Measures of Distance*, and relates that the mother in this film asks her daughter not to reveal anything about their naked images and taped chats to her father for fear of upsetting him (Naficy 2001, 119). He describes this mother-daughter relationship in Hatoum's film in these terms:

**The conjoining of the mother's words with the daughter's voice in the face of patriarchal challenge binds mother and daughter diegetically and bonds them epistolarily across the oceans, creating a consoling fantasy of maternal symbiosis. (Naficy 2001, 130)**

As Naficy also states within the "Notes" part of the book, this kind of bond can also be felt between Anna and her mother in *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, such that Anna confesses her sexual relationship with a woman to her mother, and her mother does not want her to share this with her father and Anna accepts this, hence they share a secret. In this way, they actually create a private sphere including just the two of them, and they keep the father outside of this area. He also emphasises that epistolarity is a language of desire, and the exile's desire can be rebellious, leading the individual to rebel against heterosexual relationships' standard concepts and sexual practices (Naficy 2001, 111). Similar to *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, in another epistolary film, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, there is also a lesbian relationship.

Just after this confession, Anna tells her mother that she smells very nice and says "You were using the same perfume when I was a child.. .When you were going out, you were putting on your long dress, tying back your hair and when you returned home, you'd like me to unbutton your dress. Your hands would not reach." I think these erotic descriptions of the mother also reinforces the connection that the film establishes between the mother and the lesbian lover. Finally, after her mother imparts to Anna a short childhood anecdote regarding her amiableness, Anna cuddles up to her mother and her mother also closes her eyes and grasps her tightly.

In the next scene, a fixed, medium long shot shows Anna and her mother as they are standing on an empty platform in the early morning and waiting for Anna's train. They are both silent and the noise of a train is heard. They look at each other and her mother says "Anna, say that you love me." Warily, Anna says that she loves her. She picks up her bag and leaves. Her mother looks at her from behind her like all the other characters in the film. Referring to the mother's letters, Ibanez says that "epistolary writing represents the preservation of memory for the mother and,

therefore, of the maternal-filial bond” (Ibanez 2021, 3). In this film, the contents of the mother’s monologues are very similar to those of Akerman’s mother, who constantly asks her daughter to write more and expresses how much she misses her daughter. When Anna and her mother part from each other at the station, the mother’s words “Say that you love me” also mark the mother’s wish to be remembered, to maintain her emotional connection with Anna, though they will separate soon.

In the next scene, we see Anna sitting in her seat on the train. A medium shot reflects sadness and confusion in her eyes and face. She seems to be about to cry. Even though Anna and her mother are so close to each other and this encounter is distinct from all the other encounters -it includes Anna’s own confessions and moments of intimacy-, the excessive love of the mother and the intensity of the encounter create another burden for her.

## **Paris**

In the next scene, she is walking along a platform, passing people while a tracking shot follows her. At that moment, on a sign on the train which is stopped at the platform, we see the destination, “Paris.” Next, the fixed camera shows Anna from behind while she continues walking along the platform which is crowded with people.

When it is getting dark, we see Anna outside the station. There is a medium shot of her waiting for someone. It is probably rush hour and we see people walking around and also some vehicles. Then, while it is getting darker, a medium long shot shows her from behind this time, as cars are passing in the street. Whilst the streets are empty and desolate in Akerman’s Germany and Brussels scenes, on the contrary this lively Paris street is full of cars and people. While Anna is waiting there, a small black car comes near her. We see a man at the wheel, Anna sits next to him and they leave.

In the dark, inside the car, Daniel (Jean-Pierre Cassel) Anna’s lover, drives the car and the camera shoots them from the back seat. The lights outside are seen blurred and the sounds of vehicles are heard in the background. In the car, when they talk about Daniel’s newly-cut hair or some trivial things, a coldness is felt between the two of them. When Anna asks Daniel about his problems, he says “The usual headaches.. .lots of work.” They are generally quiet in the car. The

miscommunication and distance between them are revealed as they intermittently talk with each other, even when they rarely say something to each other Anna does not look at Daniel's face. Anna asks him if he is hungry or not and she says that there is no food in her home. After touring around purposelessly, Daniel suggests they go to a hotel as he cannot stand his home and he adds that he is thinking about moving to another place. Anna accepts his offer, saying that she also finds his home very depressing.

As Akerman's double, Anna's non-possessive, nomadic, vagrant status becomes much more explicit this time because, even when she is in Paris -her home city- she prefers to go to a hotel, a transitional place rather than going to her own home. Daniel, who experiences similar post-war existential crises, as will be revealed soon, is also no different from Anna, and he also prefers to stay at a hotel, in fact he is the one that suggests this first. On the other hand, in the same conversation Daniel tells Anna that he wants to move to a bigger place in case he has children, and Anna, indifferently and partly disturbed, asks "Are you planning to have children?". Again her distanced position towards the institutions of marriage or maternity becomes apparent.

While Daniel is driving the car, he puts his hand on Anna's leg and says that he wants her. Anna seems impassive and indifferent at first, but a few seconds later she comes closer to him and after such compliments as "Is this shirt new?.. It looks good on you", she starts touching Daniel's penis. At first, Daniel wants her to continue, but suddenly he turns on the radio and Anna withdraws. A Mozart opera (*Don Giovanni*, K. 527) starts loudly on the radio. Considering the fact that Akerman uses epistolary media to reinforce the narrative and to evoke the ongoing effects of the war, I believe that the Mozart opera on the radio is also no coincidence. Indeed, despite the fact that Mozart's humanitarian ethos and the Nazis' approach to humanity is completely contrary to each other, Nazi Germany insistently promoted Mozart's music to advance the fascist regime's purposes. Also once again the radio, an epistolary media tool, prevents sexual intimacy between Anna and a man and becomes the tool of an inhibited sex act. As might be remembered, during the lovemaking between Anna and Heinrich, Anna suddenly turns off the radio when an Italian composer's song starts on the radio and she feels disturbed about that lovemaking. Similarly, this time Daniel uses the radio to reject Anna's attempt at physicality. This inhibited sexual act, along with the failed phone conversations from the beginning of the film, can be associated with the inhibited communication in accented, epistolary films.

Looking this car scene, the distance and miscommunication between Anna and Daniel can be easily noticed. The dialogue between them sounds neither fluid nor intimate. Moreover, when Anna actively attempts to initiate a sexual act for the first time, she is blocked by Daniel. In the following scene, at night, in the hotel room, Akerman's fixed long shot shows Anna standing at the window with her back to the camera. These window scenes become a leitmotif that marks Anna's rootlessness, displacement and loneliness. The room lights are on, the curtains are completely open. The lights of the neighbouring highrises are seen. There is a table and a white chair in the corner and a television next to Anna. The TV is turned off. Both the distance between Anna and her lover, and also the cold mise-en-scene of the room create a sharp contrast to the intimacy in the scenes of Anna and her mother (Schmid 2010, 57).

When Anna is looking out, Daniel lies on the double bed, as is seen from the reflection in the window. He watches Anna and asks her what she can see outside. Anna, without turning, says "The cars." Daniel rises, comes and turns on the TV which is out of order. He stands in front of the window, just next to Anna, with his back to the camera like her. Both of them look outside silently. A hissing noise from the TV and also the sounds from outside -the sound of the vehicles mostly- are heard in the background. Anna draws near him, as if to lean on him. Daniel starts caressing her hips and he continues for a while. Then, Anna holds onto his hand, as if she would like him to stop, and says that she will take a shower. After she goes, Daniel takes off his coat and walks towards the bed. We see his image reflected in the window again, he calls the reception and orders a meal for Anna and herself. The next shot shows Daniel lying on the bed. He calls out to Anna who is in the bathroom. He asks "Is the bathroom floor tiled?". After a second, Anna's voice is heard in the off-screen and she asks "Why?". Daniel says "Just asking..." Then he continues: "This week, I almost offered to resign from the job three times. It's like tilting at windmills. For what? Born, eat, drink, fuck and die." After these words, room service arrives and he stands up. In the next medium long shot, Daniel is standing at the window again and looking out, with his back to the camera. He says some insignificant things like "I saw an airplane.", "There is an air conditioner here.". These kinds of redundant statements are both a reference to Akerman's interest in the mundane but also reflect the void and blankness in Daniel's life. He seems abstracted and depressed. He takes off his jacket, loosens his tie, again looks outside. Like Anna, he is also an in-between character, an uneasy entity who is searching for something in outdoor, external places.

At that moment, Anna -with her bathrobe on- comes and stands at the window, next to Daniel, also with her back to the camera. The phone rings, Daniel goes towards the phone and picks it up. The reception informs him about the breakfast serving time. After he hangs up, the static camera shows him sitting on the edge of the bed. In a puzzled and melancholic way, he says “For a moment, I was scared that they had found me.. .But that is impossible.” Anna’s voice is heard in the off-screen and she says “You can never know. You are an important man.”

Daniel’s words, starting with his question about the shower, imply the traumatic effects of the war and the Nazis on him. Higgins, referring to the post-war generation says that “the war erupts in their behaviour and discourse without their awareness” (Higgins 1999, 65). Daniel is a Jewish man of the post-war generation and he deeply experiences the post-war trauma, as can be understood from his questions and reactions. First of all, as formerly stated, trains are mostly identified with the concentration camps, additionally showers are also another symbol of the Nazi time (Higgins 1999, 65) and Daniel asks irrelevant questions about the bathroom tiles. His anxiety about the ringing phone, his expressions like “I was scared that they had found me.” are also strong signifiers of the war. Thus, “unconscious memories are finally externalised in Daniel’s undefined symptoms, a kind of hysteria, where the body speaks” (Higgins 1999, 65). Also, his response to Anna’s last words further exhibits the despair of post-war people in the face of history, and past experiences. When Anna tells him that he is an important man, he mournfully says “Important!..We can’t prevent what is going to happen. We only drift away.”

After these words, a medium shot shows Anna while she slowly turns round and looks at him as if she wants to pay more attention to him. As in all the encounters, once again she undertakes the role of the attentive, “neutral listener”. In the off-screen, Daniel continues his monologue which displays his existential concerns: “Sometimes I want to stop paying the rent and the bills and disappear.. .But I can’t stop working. If I don’t work even for one day, for example on Sundays, I get muddled. Move on or die.” During these last sentences of Daniel’s, Anna tenuously smiles. Then, a medium shot shows Daniel again still sitting on the bed. In a melancholic way, he continues and says “If only I were a woman, do you know what I’d do? I would get pregnant and I’d let go of everything. I’d go. No matter where. Somewhere close to nature. I’d breastfeed there once every two hours.” With these words, “for a brief moment, traditional gender roles and emotional barriers seem to break down -Daniel dreams of a more feminine rhythm in union with nature and his body” (Schmid 2010, 57). Anna corrects his words regarding lactation, and says

that in the beginning babies are suckled once every three hours. Anna's comment invites examination of long-standing patriarchal myths and preconceptions about femininity again (Margulies 1999, 73).

Then Daniel continues his pessimistic monologue, and says that he thinks that he should do something to get a better life, but at the same time, he cannot imagine a better life, and he also states that everything is going to be worse. As formerly mentioned, this kind of passivity and pessimism also mark post-war Europeans' inertia and existential crises and are reminiscent of Heinrich's similar approach to the future of Germany. ("What has happened to my country?.. I ask myself what will happen to us...") He also says that it is no longer a "matter of food for everyone". He claims that the price of milk and honey will increase, the price of happiness will increase and something will happen, and he adds that he should do something. On the other hand, his intention to change his life is unable to go beyond an envisaging which accompanies the moments when he is shaving, as he says. Within the context of the epistolarity, Daniel is also another storyteller who manifests the existential anxieties, fears, concerns and despair of the era and of post-war Europeans through his long monologue. The encounters with Ida and the mother mostly exhibit the effects of the war on marital and economic life, as they are the first generation that has experienced the effects of the war directly. Heinrich, a German man living in a suburban area, talks about his wife and his anxieties about the future of Germany; the man in the train is depressingly trying to find himself and "a country of freedom", and finally Daniel, a Parisian urban man exhibits the effects of war on the post-war generation through both his speech and body language. I think Daniel is the one who personifies the existential crises of the era most. Considering the rising existentialist movement of 60s and 70s Paris, this is understandable, and Anna's encounter with him complements all the other stories, the whole palimpsestic structure of the film.

After his generally depressing statements, he asks Anna to sing a song for him. He says "What could be more beautiful than a woman's voice?.." Anna, in the off-screen, says that she sings out of tune, but when Daniel reminds her that she wanted to be a singer, she accepts. In a medium shot, smilingly she asks "What would you like me to sing?.." After Daniel says that she can sing whatever she wants, she thinks for a few seconds, then comes a few steps forward, her hands are in the pockets of her bathrobe. She starts singing an Edith Piaf song, *Les Amants d'un Jour*, a song about two lovers who commit suicide. The vivid melody of the song creates a strong

contrast with the contents of the song and also the way Anna is singing it, the occasional bitterness in her voice also displaying her resistance to “conventional romance” as Margulies also states:

**As she complies with Daniel’s desire to be soothed, her choice of song suggests a perverse twist on the maternal-feminine lullaby-function: an embittered despair leaks from under the “la-la-la” lightness of Piaf’s melody, as Anna’s voice gently states her resistance to conventional romance and its attendant inequalities. (Margulies 1999, 73)**

After she finishes her song, the static camera shows Daniel lying on the bed, looking towards Anna. A few seconds later, Anna comes and sits next to him, with a smiling expression on her face. Daniel says “It was very nice.” Then, he looks at the ceiling and says “Shortly after, we will make love and tomorrow you will go away... I will be alone again while I want you above all”. When he says these words, Anna states that he should have to go to work in any case. These expressions which remind us of Heinrich’s reproachful words in the hotel room, once again display the continual expectations of Anna’s all male interlocutors. On the other hand, all the interlocutors’ passivity during the moments when Anna is leaving, “is a sign that they accept Anna’s leaving almost a deserved response to their own anachronism” (Margulies 1999, 72-73), thus she “sets apart in a subtle feminist punctuation” (Margulies 1999, 73).

He asks her to come and lie on him. Anna gets up, takes off her bathrobe and lies on him, naked. I would like to emphasise that, during the film Akerman continually refuses “to give us Anna as object of our gaze” and “even when undressed, her body is not eroticised” (Higgins 1999, 68). She wraps her arms around Daniel’s neck first, but at one point she notices that he is shaking and he has a temperature. She asks him to wait and tells that she will be back soon. She gets up and leaves.

In the next medium long shot, we see Anna at the reception of the hotel, talking to the receptionist. She asks for some medicine and after she finds out that there is not any, she walks, stunned, towards the exit of the hotel. When she is walking, her body language reveals that she have no energy for one more journey and she is too overburdened and exhausted because of all the encounters and the stories that have been told her.

In the next scene, we see Anna in a cab. During the whole film, Akerman generally uses medium long shots or medium shots and a few tracking shots to create a distance between the spectator

and the spectacle. For the first time, she uses a close up, and we see that Anna is washed-up. Her eyes are slightly moist. In the meantime, the lights outside are seen blurrily in the frame. The sounds of the vehicles and the indicator of the taxi are heard simultaneously. All these sounds reinforce the film's transitional mode, and accentuate Anna's nomadic identity once again. Though these sounds have always been in the background during the whole film, this time they function as if suppressing Anna's whole existence, they absorb her.

Then, from the taxi's point of view, we see the outside, the Paris traffic, the cars in the darkness of the night. Their sounds are heard loudly. For a while, Akerman continues shooting the two-way roads, the the car headlamps in the dark. Whereas Akerman uses symmetrical and formal shots until this moment of the film, for the first time she prefers skewed compositions, thus she signifies Anna's increased psychological chaos. Next, a close up shot displays her misery, as she is almost crying. She looks outside blankly. Once more we see the outside, the shops, from her side window's point of view.

After a long shot of Anna as she is coming out of a pharmacy, in the following scene we see her in the hotel room again. In the room, Daniel is lying on the bed, under the covers, naked. Anna is at the bedside and is preparing a solution for him. After he drinks it, Anna wants him to turn over so she can massage his back. While she is massaging him, she becomes aroused and attempts to put her hands further down his body, but he asks her to stop. Anna seems disappointed and quickly finishes the massage, lays the covers over him again, gets up and after looking towards him for a few seconds -the camera shows the lower half of her body- she leaves. This whole massage scene, Daniel's second rejection of Anna, once again presents the detached situation of the estranged couple. Both sexually and verbally, they can not establish a relationship. On the other hand, as with the other unshown things -Heinrich's house, the bar scene, the gala event, Anna's house in Brussels, the sexual relationship with her lesbian lover, or any war images-, Akerman prefers not to show a complete sexual act to the viewer. This also affects the audience's experience, as Foster states: "...Sexual encounters are not fulfilling, and the film encourages a cerebral audience identification, rather than a "pleasurable" passive audience experience" (Foster 1999, 3).

## **Arrival “home”**

After the hotel scene, Akerman cuts to Anna’s front door as she is unlocking it. She leaves the door open, enters the home. She does not turn on the lights. In a chiaroscuro shot, she opens the sitting room window. In the dark, she stands for a while and looks outside. Some music is faintly heard in the distance. After looking outside for a while, she goes and closes the front door. Then, she goes to her bedroom, turns on the light for a second and looks at her bed which seems quite tidy. She turns off the light again. She goes to the kitchen and opens her refrigerator, which is empty. She takes a bottle of water from there, drinks from it and puts it back in the refrigerator. She leaves the kitchen and walks along the dark hallway. She looks almost like a ghost in the darkness. The lifeless atmosphere of her home, the spare furniture, the empty kitchen echo her “homelessness”. In her book, Bruno mentions the dichotomies between voyage/home and male/female and she argues that home can also be the “place where the home itself moves and creates possibilities for gender nomadisms” (Bruno 2007, 81) and she says that Akerman’s films, along with Antonioni’s films, show that “the house moves” (Bruno 2007, 103). I agree with this view, however Anna’s home is neither a domestic place, nor a place of domestication, and nor does it present the possibilities of a self-exploration, it is not a place where Anna can make an inner journey. It is far from “moving”, it is totally static. It is merely a place of departure and return. It is empty of any meaning or any cosiness. As a voluntary exile and a nomad, Anna has no wish to possess any place or personalise it; and the film is totally based on her mobilisation and transition. Indeed during all the film she sways from side to side and even though she is in a hotel room, she is always at the windows, looking outside. Home becomes an avoided place throughout the film through the characters. Not just Anna, but Anna’s mother and Daniel also tend to be away from home. Also, Heinrich’s house is not like a real house, rather it seems a scary, ghostly place. Above all, the film is based on stories, the act of storytelling, and these stories can only be delivered on the road.

In the final scene of the film, Anna lies on the bed fully-dressed and a chiaroscuro shot is used again. She starts listening to the messages from her answering machine, another epistolary media device, and looks almost dead throughout these moments. As if totally worn out because of all the personal confessions, patriarchal expectations, projections and the stories which reflect the predicament of Europe after World War II, she starts listening to her messages:

-Anna. This is Michel. On Friday afternoon, let's meet at the cafe as we planned. Don't forget. See you.

-This is Helene. I have just come in. Call me when you get back. 578 11 72. I hope that everything is okay. I am here until Friday, then I will return home. I hope that this time we catch each other. I have a lot of things to tell you...

- (A man voice) It's me.

- Anna this is Jean Paul. You should attend these screenings: Friday/Lausanne, Sunday/Geneva, Monday/Zurich. Reservations are made for the 13th at the Terminus Hotel, Lausanne, for the 14th the Mondial, Geneva and for the 15th the Excelsior Hotel, Zurich.

- This is Claire. Call me when you get back. Or you can call 272 15 76 after six o'clock.

- Again this machine!

- Anna, dove sei? Anna, where are you?

- This is Alain. Today is my birthday. I wanted to spend it with you... Maybe next year.

Anna's paralysed situation while she is listening to the messages is reminiscent of another epistolary Hamid Naficy discusses in his book. Referring to the Suleiman character in Elia Suleiman's *Homage by Assassination* (1992) Naficy states:

**Suleiman is pessimistic about the epistolary media's communitarian potentials, for despite their clamor, there is a strong sense of prohibition and deliberate silence at work. The sole diegetic character, the filmmaker, appears to be under siege and paralyzed by technological mediation. He seems to be waiting, unable to speak and impossible to reach. The voices of people attempting to reach him are heard on the answering machine. (Naficy 2001, 117-118)**

In Anna's case, she doesn't receive any news about a war as in the Suleiman case, but the past encounters and foreseen journeys in the future, and all those people that want to see her, talk to her, be with her, paralyse Anna. Besides, especially her Italian lover's message (Anna dove sei? Anna where are you?), emphasises the uncertainty of Anna's location and marks Anna's continued absence and her vagrant position.

The closing credits of the film appear within total silence, like the opening credits. In his book, Naficy says that "As a structurally open-ended process, exile encourages films that are both

unfinished and unpolished” (Naficy 2001, 108). Indeed, the fate of Anna is unknown at the end of the film. We only understand that soon she will depart again and continue her wanderings in Europe. In addition to dystopic accented films, Naficy refers to Solanas’ *Tangos, The Exile of Gardel* (1985) and Agnès Varda’s *L’une chante, l’autre pas* (1977) as other exilic films that create an optimistic feeling in the viewer due to their communitarian qualities. When we look at *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*’s final scene, it is hard to say that it is a kind of a film that stirs optimistic feelings in the viewer. It starts as a self-exploration journey, an identity journey, but throughout her journey Anna’s multiple identities emerge and her subjectivity disperses. Besides, as the film also reflects Akerman’s own exilic identity, it is "intersubjectively claustrophobic” (Naficy 2001, 150).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* is a road movie about a nomadic, woman filmmaker who is crossing Europe three decades after World War II. Throughout this film on memories, language and physical travel, Akerman is doing a mapping exercise, starting from Essen through Cologne and Brussels to Paris. She particularly marks these crucial locations of World War II and connects them to each other as in World War II films, because her mother is a Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivor, and Anna’s/Akerman’s journey is a journey of remembrance for the filmmaker who is trying to explore herself, and to create an identity through this journey through her mother’s past. She needs to invent a language that carries the memories of her mother. For this reason, she uses the epistolary, storytelling and epistolary media tools as the means of establishing a language to reach her mother’s past.

During her mapping, Akerman makes no attempt to possess any cities or countries, and stays at the same distance from all of these European cities, because as she always states she has no notion of land and she also does not believe in a common European identity. Her Jewish identity, her family’s mandatory exile during the Holocaust, is the base of her non-possessive attitude but she also has other identities that make her an exilic and nomadic person. She is a lesbian/woman director, an avant-garde artist, all these multiple identities contribute to her “in-between”, liminal character.

The film reflects this liminality from both a thematic perspective and also through the images and sounds of the transit. It is an accented film in respect of its themes journey, displacement, self-

exploration, loneliness. Also, the visual presence of the transitional spaces such as hotels, bars, restaurants; and both the visual and aural presence of transitional vehicles such as trains and cars make the film highly accented. Specifically, I argue that it is an epistolary film and throughout this study, I have tried to support my ideas, referencing Hamid Naficy's theories on epistolarily structured exilic films and transitional spaces. I believe that there are various reasons that make this film epistolary. First, throughout the film Akerman does not show any images from World War II or the personal lives of the characters, or the interior of the spaces; instead she constructs a palimpsestic structure which is based on the serial stories of the interlocutors, and this is a characteristic of epistolary films as "epistolarity demands seriality" (Naficy 2001, 113). While Anna transits from one country to another, Akerman displays a transition by juxtaposing some spaces and cities throughout the film. Through the transference of social and personal stories of the post-war, she superimposes the information related to the identity and memory of Europe.

Akerman removes events and spaces from the narrative and I believe that her choice is directly related to the missing parts in her life, her memory. Her mother and family prefer not to talk about their anguished Holocaust past. Similarly Akerman also prefers to omit events in the film. We do not see the gala event in Essen, the interior of the Essen bar, the lunch in Heinrich's house, the lesbian lover in Italy, the family in Brussels. Everything is transmitted through stories in the course of the film. For this reason, I believe that the monologues in the film act as verbal letters which refer to sequences from the traumatic past of Europe or the personal stories of post-war people. In this context, the epistolary is an absolutely crucial device in the film, because via these verbal deliveries, both other diegetic characters and the spectators can be informed. Secondly, as in epistolary novels, the monologues in the film have a confessional tone. Besides, as common characteristics of the epistolary form, the confessors are in despair, they are exilic and abandoned characters. They have been abandoned by their lovers or their lands.

On the other hand, throughout this thesis, I also state that though the stories are the only way of getting information in this film, they are not completely fulfilling, they contain missing, implicit or surface information, or some redundant repetitive statements. For instance, none of the interlocutors talk about the concentration camps or Jews explicitly. I claim that this is also related to Akerman's underinformed status. She does not allow viewers to reach essential, deeper knowledge about the history of Europe or personal experiences. This is totally understandable when considering that this film mirrors Akerman's own life, and that she lived her life in the

absence of accurate information. Indeed, this film directly reflects Akerman's nomadic and exilic character, and Anna is Akerman's alter ego, as an exilic filmmaker with a Jewish identity and in a lesbian relationship. As Naficy states, epistolary cinema is both fictional and documentary (Naficy 2001, 105) and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* is very suitable to this definition since it is an autofictional work, and especially the encounter with the mother is the best example that displays this intertwining of the two genres. This self-reflexive quality is one of the other components that makes this film epistolary.

In terms of the use of epistolary media tools, there is the actual presence of notes in the film along with the letterlike monologues. Anna receives notes from her mother and Daniel when she is in Essen, or Ida mentions Anna's mother's letters to her. Anna also informs Ida that she and her mother write to each other. But especially the use of telephones and the presence of the answering machine within the narration make this film closer to the telephonic epistles that Naficy mentions. During the film, several times Anna tries to talk to her lover in Prato, Italy through the telephone. The film's opening scene starts with a phone call on the railway platform in Essen and finishes with the messages from the answering machine in Anna's home in Paris. Another epistolary media tool, the radio, which is the marker of war, plays a critical role in the film. At some moments, the songs from the radio become a reminder of Anna's feelings about her lesbian lover, so it further increases the sense of absence in this film as in other exilic, epistolary films; and at other brief moments it reminds us of depressing memories of war.

Inhibitions and prohibitions against epistolary communication are the other characteristics of the epistolary mode, and in this film Anna fails to reach her lesbian lover in Italy many times. She receives some notes and calls from her mother when she is at the hotel in the Essen, but she can not find out how her mother learned the location of her accommodation. She cannot catch her mother's calls because when Anna arrives in reception, her mother has already hung up, or her mother calls Anna before she arrives at her hotel. Apart from the inhibitions against the use of epistolary media, in general, there is miscommunication between Anna and the other characters, and this is also a feature of epistolarily formed exilic films. Epistolary films involve inhibitions against orality. The communication between Anna and her interlocutors is always strange, most of the time the characters do not look directly into each other's eyes, the characters' position in relation to the camera looks as if they are not talking to each other, rather they are talking to the viewer, or they seem to be staring into space. The extended monologues, and the excessive

statements of the enunciators boost this miscommunication. The inhibited orality is also seen in the shape of Anna's eating disorder, too. Finally, the inhibited sexual act is another characteristic of epistolary films, and in this film sexual acts cannot be completed.

I also claim that this film is a totally feminist film, as Anna resists all the patriarchal expectations of her male interlocutors. Silence becomes a significant instrument of this resistance and a way of blocking the suppressive contents of the speeches. Regardless of the manipulative expressions, and complaints of the opposite sex, she persists with her own choices. She stays silent, seems to be compliant but in the end she goes her own way. Besides, the other significant thing that makes the film feminist is the way Akerman exhibits both the demanding heterosexual relationships of the traditional patriarchal system on one side, and alternatively, the possibility of lesbian love, together in the same narrative, back to back. The close mother-daughter relationship, which becomes a background for Anna's confession about her lesbian sex act, Anna's disinterest in maternity and marriage, all of these properties make the film completely feminist. From an epistolary perspective, the existence of homosexual relationships is another characteristic of epistolary, accented films since homosexuality can be a resistance to the existing norms.

Finally, the emphasis on language and accent in the film bolsters up my argument about the connection between *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* and epistolarity, since epistolary films include multilingualism. Throughout the film Anna, during the encounter with Ida, with the stranger in the train and with her mother, lays stress on the issue of accent.

From the formal perspective, *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* can be considered as a more narrative oriented film compared to Akerman's radical and experimental films in the 1970s, however the stylised compositions, Akerman's fixed camera angles, long silences and extended monologues, lack of any diegetic or non-diegetic music (except for the few moments that the radio is turned on), plus its minimalist mise-en-scene make the film as avant-garde as her previous works in the 1970s. Also, since the film includes all the themes that the filmmaker focused on throughout her career, it is like a synthesis of all Akerman's other films. It is also very remarkable and one of the most idiosyncratic Akerman works because this film pointed the way to Akerman's other works in the following decade, the 1980s, as it involves more focus on narrative but also continues those Akerman strategies which make her cinema unique.

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