



# Veil the Transparent Vision: From Lacanian Registers to the Images of Chantal Akerman

Boyang Wei

Ningxia University, Yinchuan, China

2991047891@qq.com

**Abstract.** Considering the preference to Chantal Akerman for a frontal gaze at the body images in her films, yet few papers have been adequate for fully grasping the value of Akerman's cinematic images through carrying out analyses to this undifferentiated basic movement. The paper therefore chooses to introduce Lacanian framework concerning the content of the visual image to review the great female author's expressions of visual perception in distinct spatial scales of her typical works; and furthermore to argue that how the concepts of the nature, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, reflected in featured space, matter the structure of the viewer's gaze that inside and outside the screen. With reference to the already established spatial margins, my aim is to explore the fundamental opposition between the inner and outer realms, as well as those unceasing encounters from the nature to order during the construction of meaning induced by the acts of gaze and look in Akerman's films. Following the inspiration the filmmaker has been brought, I also extend the link between seeing and being seen reasoned therein, into a wider context of our own embodiment.

**Keywords:** Chantal Akerman; Jaques Lacan; Gaze; Register Theory; Space.

## 1 Introduction

When it comes to Chantal Akerman and the thinking about “look” that her works have ever brought to us, research articles tend to spontaneously extend this “look” to theories based on the gender gaze, in the context of her status as a feminist scholar, and thus develop many arguments revolving around the opposing and co-existing parts of gender consciousness that shown in her film images. However, when the perspective consciously escapes from that of gender studies, when the concept of “look” traces back from John Berg to Jacques Lacan, few papers have been able to analyze the construction of the connection between Akerman's images and the very motion within this more basic dimension. Although, the director herself has once emphasized that Lacan's interpretation of “look” has certain bearing on her own understanding towards the objective world:

“I'll put the camera there, in front, as long as is necessary and the truth will appear. [...] that cannot be said except by taking it to the end, saying it in halves, as Lacan suggests. [...] When we show the things that the whole world has already seen, perhaps,

© The Author(s) 2024

S. Zhu et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2023)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 831,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-214-9\\_69](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-214-9_69)

then, at a given moment, we start to see for the first time. [...] Suddenly, in one blow, without warning, we feel that something appears that could be, at the same time, pleasure or fear, or a heartbeat. So either we close our eyes and leave or we accept this upheaval.” (Akerman, 2004, pp.30–31 & 39) <sup>1</sup>

Through Akerman’s words, we can extract three key elements from the passage: the viewer, the world that offers vision, and the author who places the camera. On the basis of these three items, it is possible to establish a triadic model which is broadly matched with the project of going to the cinema. The flow of sight (whether belong to the subject or the object), therefore plays a particularly pivotal role in the structural features of the given model.

Unlike Sartre who “is mostly found using look and gaze interchangeably” (Sharma & Barua, 2016)<sup>14</sup>, Lacan draws a line between the two separating gaze from the act of look (Lacan, 1964)<sup>7</sup>, he considers the “look” that actually possible for the subject or the other as the “gaze of the imaginary” and one that impossible for the subject as the “gaze of the symbolic” or the “gaze of the real”, which respectively come from the “Big Other”, symbolizing order (Lacan, 1953)<sup>8</sup>, and the “Object-a”, symbolizing omniscience (Lacan, 1957)<sup>9</sup>. The reference to these terms in this paper will continue following the Lacanian tradition.

This paper focuses on the triadic model that built amongst the viewer, the author, and the photographed material world as the research target, while taking the Lacanian “Register Theory” (the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real) (Lacan, 1953)<sup>8</sup> as the guiding theory, to analyze the being of the “look” induced by the “gaze” and the “gaze” itself in Akerman’s films.

Considering the “dialectics between interior and exterior spaces” (Jacobs, 2012, p.73)<sup>6</sup> that Akerman usually embodies in her images, in accordance with the spatial limits (as well as a kind of restraint to Lacanian visibility) that the camera had been confined to during recording process. I classify her films into three main forms: between room-in and room-out, between building-in and building-out, between city-in and city-out. Specific discussions will take place under representative Akerman’s work of each of the three.

## **2 Between room-in and room-out: Invasion of the Other; correction of nature**

Following the May Storm in 1968, which as the aftermath of the events entails a batch of directors alter critical attention to the enclosed, private space of the contemporary world (Habid, 2010, pp.59-77)<sup>5</sup>. In responding to this thinking, Akerman subsequently began to put her camera into the room, in evoking “houses, rooms, and notions of domesticity and seclusion” (Jacobs, 2012, p.76)<sup>6</sup>. Her first 86mins work *I, You, He, She* (Chantal Akerman, 1974) was born out of this motivation, and it is almost entirely a film about a room. The room, a place where the mirror has been hidden, is finally noticed by our sights anew from this work.

In “the Mirror Stage” (Lacan, 1949)<sup>10</sup>, the infant completes the self-awareness through a continuous process of identifying with the image in the mirror. Nevertheless,

what is easily overlooked for the period is that as infant looks at its self-image, meanwhile it also sees the room in which it is placed. The room induces a contradictory structure between the ego to imagine the recognition from the other and the ego to indicate the opposition to the other. A baby, after realizing that it can control its own movements for activity within the room, comes to understand that it can be the sole master of the very space. And when all masters travel out from different occupied rooms, the outside intersubjectivity has thus been reflected.

In the house, the camera is put into a just-right position to record woman's acts during her long hours of solitude, she mediates at the table, she keeps moving the furniture, she writes letters and pins them together, she wanders, she curls herself up (Fig.1). Our eye-sights which "don't go in too close, but are not very far away" (Akerman, 1998)<sup>2</sup> are aligned with the trajectory of her body that ever come-and-gone. To resist the "voyeuristic gesture" (Akerman, 1998)<sup>2</sup>, the camera's lens as if has had to become a pure surface of mirror to mirror the full presence of hostess's self-body through viewer's look, so that the original one in the room no longer needs to be used. Here the author Akerman constructs a regression to the Lacanian pre-linguistic phase, fulfilled by the actress Akerman whose self-body is fully engaged in the room, including the use of everyday materials and the management of spatial resources. However, the woman in this site seldom describes the relevance of her acts; she consumes sugar with hands in paranoid silence, and moves the mattress shifted back and force. The direct imaginary gaze comes from the viewer makes it clear that she relies on ours cognizing and identifying the whole knowledge of her body, yet she still keeps trying to emulate certain sort of infantile mindset. While on the other side of the mirror, that is the viewer ourselves who is unable to detach from the inertia conferred of language and can merely observe the logic of the character's acts under the order symbolized by language; or more precisely, we are observing through the screen the "disordered ego in the mirror" and striving to correct it. Between what Lacan calls outside world "the Other" and the room master's private nature, there is an inevitable conflict.



**Fig. 1.** With some process happening in the room, camera plays as a pure mirror surface in *I, You, He, She*.

The viewer's possible look accordingly evolves into Akerman's "exit" from the room, and her dominated interior of the house is no more an isolated space since the moment it is dropped in by the camera, Valle Corpas's words as "when she moves around the house, the entirety of her story is contained" (Valle Corpas, 2021)<sup>15</sup> may not be inherently found. The living chamber in the image fades into a vision that exists only inside the mirror. The force of the gaze within symbolic order blocks "the spontaneity of the pre-reflective consciousness" (Lacan, 1991)<sup>12</sup> to the private nature, the camera that holds our sights simultaneously restricts the "essential freedom" (Lacan, 1991)<sup>12</sup> of our desire to roam the house, the house out of language then gradually breaks down. Which leads to the fact that she begins to write letters, for she cannot abandon letters; she starts using tongue to feel the situation (by voice-over), in reestablishing contact with the outside world; she eventually looks out the window, next finds out the outdoor view also her figure in the glass. After that body-shape reflection arrived moment, the mirror link from her to us has disappeared, the solitary woman becomes an individual, and we viewer return to the Other in the room.

The gaze of the symbolic of the Other is embodied in the actress Akerman's advent at her lover's apartment. When the master of the room reaches a new house which does not belong to her, simply can she symbolically look into it. The "childish and repetitive experimentation" (Valle Corpas, 2021)<sup>15</sup> that the original nature had harnessed fails in the realm of the else. She can only be guided by the chains of meaning in the symbolic, the bed edge is where the two sit and talk, the table is where people dine, the doorway is for lingering, and onto the unfamiliar bed is where lovers give vent to desires (Fig.2). The woman who once wandered from the interior of the house now follows the steps of visit in a decent manner. She, as an intelligent being projected by us by virtue of a symbolic context, takes on the identity of the viewer's remote gaze. Like us, everything apropos of the already constructed order of the living room suits her touch, but the texture of the primary silent things sunk within it, whom the infant's gaze first poured into when it was firstly seeing the calm room in the front of mirror, has been losing forever.



**Fig. 2.** A sudden drop-by actually manifests the symptom of the symbolic room-space in *I, You, He, She*.

### 3 Between building-in and building-out: Construction of order; expiration of desire

With a panning, camera reaches out the window, once follows the evening pedestrian out of rooms. Cafes, pubs, hotels, corridors, those ever shown in Akerman's film images frequently flicker at night, have provided a series of enclosed places that are surrounded by walls, like room yet with public attributes. People casually sojourn there as a repose of flitting through the long night-time. These sites are governed by the order that each has generated. Amblers walk inside such common grounds, afterwards, as Serge Daney writes for *A whole night* (Chantal Akerman, 1982), they "throw themselves at each other, the whole world seems to have won in the lottery of desire" (Daney, 1986)<sup>3</sup>.

The confined public area, which always has an affiliation with a building, is formed according to the structure of a typical room. However, unlike the absolute privacy and vulnerability of the latter, wherever on the top floor of a hotel or beneath a neon nightclub, either has been maintaining its opening solidity. If it has been proved that confusion diffuses in the room as a result of the intervention of the Other, then in the building, the same Other is in attendance for all time, and has taken charge of the space. In which Lacan means the Other "as gaze remains on the side of the object" (Lacan, 1964)<sup>7</sup>; only has it the power of gaze, and only has it the freedom of a thorough gaze.

There is no need for the viewer to be a guest in person; from the screen, when the young girl is seen entering the somber cafe alone, and two men waving for the cab to stop, and people leaving to their own flat (Fig.3); the object Other is already gazing at us behind the scene, which has mutely marked the ideology within the functional building. The theoretically infinite visibility carried by the viewer's look, whereas, is seized by the illusive master; girls drink, lie on the sofa and smoke, some at the next table come and talk to them, they laugh, many get up and go out; because here is the midnight pub, audiences just lack the capacity to look, and to know elsewhere. What has been presented to the eyes is no more than the surplus after symbolization to the real (Lacan, 1964)<sup>7</sup>. Akerman makes novelty of showing bodily attitudes as the sign of states of body (Deleuze, 1989, p.196)<sup>4</sup> at the expense of steering her characters closer to the realistic circumstance, to the residue of the daily normal. The almost equal reproduction of the functional common place from reality to film images thereby more easily domesticates the way of seeing, for instance the position of tables and chairs, the necessity of the presence of light, the density of wine glasses that are displayed, some metal accessories, glasses stuffs, and the consumers' dress (Fig.4) ... The logic of materials-seeing is taken hold by the master, who masters the order itself into the logic that has been constructed.



**Fig. 3.** People recorded by camera have replaced us as guests into those night buildings in *A whole night*.



**Fig. 4.** The logic of materials-seeing has been given by the master, whatever guests aspire to discover in *A whole night*.

Somewhere along the timeline, couples, or perhaps just two strangers, they addictively approach to each other, and to hug, swirl, dance as if they do things in principle (Fig.4). Which reflects a vague desire that ever prompts us to endeavor to dissolve and divert the master's rule, in discovering the integrate component that has not yet undergone cutting, to transcend the gaze of the symbolic. This is actually what Lacan says about the desire to "return to the real", but he also emphasizes that the real can never be substantialized, and that any approach to it will only be met with an expulsion from the real (Lacan, 1988)<sup>11</sup>, as well as known as the subject's "traumatic event" (Zizek, 1989, p.213)<sup>17</sup>. In the dimension of the realm of the real, there are no buildings below night, there is no "night" or "buildings", no colors or shapes; unrelated to language, things have lost the notion of existence, nothingness cannot regard itself as nothingness. The genuine nocturnal space thus vanishes into "complete lack and scarcity" (Lacan, 1964)<sup>7</sup>, and the identity of the masters of those buildings dies together with the loss of things-meaning. It is sensible that to fancy the viewer stepping into the real without the Other's gaze, for the real pre-exists the meaning, which on the other hand, but then again, is the basic condition for the continuation of life. In order to return to the real

and in order to see something before meaning is likewise a kind of meaning, so it is fated to fail. The liberated visibility that we dream about is permanently a visibility that slips from one residue to another, which through denying one meaning to consider the meaning of the “denial of meaning”.

Consequently, Akerman’s description of the midnight stage in her work is not to convey a category of alienated symbols. She lets those residents (usually the women) flee from their houses and throw themselves into the night (Valle Corpas, 2021)<sup>15</sup>. Roamers hop from cafe to cafe, cross one corridor to the second; the director has been willing to embrace any of the affirmative symbolic. As a woman walks down the corridor to her room, the master’s consciousness is calling back from the Other to herself mind. Akerman stresses such order shifting among venues with the aim of waking the constant elements contained in the viewer’s look when directly looking at the uncertain scene, which must lead to the inward nature of eternity. That woman has the ability to return home at dawn, for the symbolic just forces her and in no case can assimilate her. Her nature, haunting in the private room, always resists being subordinate to the meaning. She, and others who are on the way home, as solid objects projected by the viewer, soothe the wounds caused by our occasional desire by loosing in the phantom of the buildings. The nature remains in opposition to the order, depends on it as well for living, and the persistent gaze of the symbolic Other, in actual fact, suggests the possibility of a portal to the real. As Lacan writes “we realize that everything we are now seeing is a trap; but it is the everything we are now seeing” (Lacan, 1977, p.93). The symbolic has been generating much intricate illusion, the nature recognizes it, distinguishes it, fails to alienate it and so forth.

#### **4 Between city-in and city-out: Vanishing of barriers; inertia of interior**

If one maintains the view of conversion mentioned above that the exodus from the public field heralds the handover of the gaze-making subject, just as moving from the corridor to the room corresponds to a class of situations in which nature is recalled. Then, by the 1970s, when Akerman arrives in New York and is confronted with “an adverse and socially atomized city” (White, 2010, p.365)<sup>16</sup>, it seems tender for her to decide a description of the home-coming process as precisely as she would have done in Brussels. The room is outlawed from her temporary quarters there, and she waits in her makeshift abode for news from home. As she goes out and gets back, the inward convertible path of the gaze in the building is relegated, but because of the shunless gaps that develop in the transition of orders which ask the gaze of building-out place for filling, the drifting auteur has begun to draw her characters into a space of even greater emptiness. The camera follows them wandering between streets, highways and transports, where the Other’s gaze expands, endures dilution and at last evaporates.

*News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1976) is a film created accordingly. In the film, the voice-over intermittently states the content of the letters sent by Akerman’s mother from Europe, concerning daily life, family matters and some inquiries; camera travels day and night through the bleak urban region; visual and audio narrations are separated.

The viewer connects seeing and hearing by virtue of his own perception to those filmed materials from the deep screen. When her mom expresses her longing and worries in letters, we, in response, feel the strange environment in the city-image and recollect the hometown verdure over trees and grass trails of the present. When she writes about dad's illness, we cannot help assuring the slack avenues in front of our eyes, or the forlorn shadows on the roads cast by buildings. When device records the underground's progress, the woman no longer reads letters for tunnels had received no signal, only permitted the sound of dry rail (Fig.5). Supposing that Akerman has returned our attention to a long-lost harmony and naturalness extended in the established logic of observation, by describing the sublime symbols that fill in the interior of the building; now as she finally uses her equipment to document the city, chains of meaning which have been accumulated in the symbolic, are, however, gradually blurred under boundless stretch of the spatial boundary.



**Fig. 5.** Due to the clues of audio narration, originally uncertain visual information starts to connect emotional response to the viewer in *News from Home*.

Both as areas close to the reality, urban space and the room play two quite distinct conversion mechanisms of the Other's gaze. To continue along the lines of the previous analysis to the commonality of spaces in which we find ourselves, we will find that the knowledge of a city does not have the feature pertains to isolation that is initially embodied in a room. There, surrounded on all sides by impenetrable barriers, nature has once driven the master to arouse an awareness of territory in the fictional delusion of being protected. But the existence of the city is fundamentally opposite to the room structure, and it is in reliance on such polarity so that the room master has chance to gain a sense of relativity between the inner and outer worlds.

Based on the independence of sound and image in the work *News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1976), we see the body of a city and have obtained the link that strings our private experience, albeit from the indeterminate way of observation. Nevertheless, the conditional logic refers to reason and search implicit in the act of look still occurs under the invisible force. This phenomenon may confirm the gaze from the city, which also binds the viewer into the ideology system. No more than in the city, the construction of the pattern of consciousness requires us to measure its representation according to inward idiosyncrasy of self-spirit; for all men have had to come from the room at the very beginning, and all who walk in the city are but performing a fleeing. The master of the city, as the perpetrator of the urban gaze, to some extent resembles Lacanian continuation of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the "Seer" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.40)<sup>13</sup>, and the citizens are subjected to the pressure of the "pre-gaze" (Lacan, 1977, p.72), which has been projecting no matter where they go in the outside city. Although there is a split from Lacanian term lying in the pre-gaze here is not formed "before

meaning” (Lacan, 1977, p.72), it is formed “before meaning is defined”; the city master, like the master of any public building, needs to embody its own existence through the institution of order, so it can by no means be the “Object-a” (Lacan, 1977, pp.7-12), which, in token of omniscience, gleams in the real. The pre-gaze the master launches is just to gaze at the definitional passage of meaning time after time; it is gazing at how things can be subsumed by the exodus from the impression constitution of several composite neutral logic of materials-seeing into a new category of observation to fit the exodus's sole experiential values.

Further, any consciousness that contains the rooted characteristic of interior, when exposed to the outside, is left with the inertia of a class of the consciousness to its master; in other words, the deepening practical experience behind the wall once fades, as the wall collapses, into the master's experience and impression of his comprehensive past time lived behind the wall. We follow the culprit camera, which has flattened our room, towards the contour, depicted by inertia, of the things in the city. The body of the city, is an empirical description of the inertia of the consciousness of the inner world; and the gaze of the city, is the questioning to the body of the consciousness itself of the inner world.

## 5 Conclusion

By resorting to Lacanian “Register Theory”, this paper analyzes the flow of sight amongst the viewer, the author (the camera), and the photographed material world. I cite three of her films, made at different times, to argue for the existence of the gaze within the confines of the room, the building, and the city.

Into the room of *I, You, He, She*, the viewer seeks to correct the disordered behavior of the room's mistress. For she and we have built an inter-mirror links, we are her projection from the imaginary; her body, her body gesture and her subjective consciousness of self are evidenced at the moment we look at her. But we on this end of the screen, being fluent in language, are unable to perceive the chaotic act of the solitary woman because the meaning from it cannot be checked by words; our gaze towards the room is essentially an invasion of the symbolic. Eventually the camera shows her giving in the language in a conflict between the symbolic Other and the nature, and she subsequently embodies such an invasion by means of a visit to another room with carrying her language.

Into the building of *A whole night*, the functional area succeeds the enveloping conformation of the room. In order to balance the opposing natures of the room masters, the identity of the very master within the building is taken over by the symbolic Other, who, by providing a separate set of way of seeing, creates an independent orientation of chains of meaning that does not trench on any side, and the seeing is always under the gaze for surveillance of the Other itself. It culminates in being a neutral residency of which the room master responds in advance to the precedent symbolic meaning and then stays temporarily for specific need. When people, as guests, at some point attempt to break the roles set up by the Other, it is actually the desire to return to the real, but the real has been forming prior to the meaning, while the fulfillment of meaning is the

basic condition for the continuation of life. So, such desires end up in vain, the night fails as usual behind those towering buildings.

Into the urban space of *News from Home*, the viewer establishes connections between the discrete audio and visual narrations through self-cognition and experience. In this somewhat extreme structure of images, we may find that when the room master goes out from the interior of the building and is encountered with an infinite space without walls. The master can only rely on the remaining inertia of the consciousness fostered in the inner world to see the body of the city. The gaze of the city plays a role in this process of seeing as a questioning to the very essence of our consciousness; it takes place before “meaning is defined”, and realizes its own presence in the order by gazing at the order structure in which the meaning has been necessarily constructed.

In summary, we are able to identify the influence of Lacanian ideas of the gaze on Chantal Akerman’s works. All she has once written down in her book that we start to see those familiar things for the first time at a given moment, and has referred to emotions such as fear, sadness, pleasure that occur during looking, as well as a steady flow of upheaval that appears when we close our eyes (Akerman, 2004, pp.30–31& 39) <sup>1</sup>, seem to become traceable with the in-depth analyses of the paper.

## References

1. Akerman, C., & Paquot, C. (2004). Chantal Akerman: Autoportrait En Cinéaste. Cahiers du Cinéma.
2. Akerman, C. (2009[1998]). Chantal Akerman on Jeanne Dielman. Criterion Collection. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pSNOEYSIIg>.
3. Daney, S. (1986). Toute une nuit, Ciné-Journal, Volume I: 1981-1982. Cahiers du cinéma, London.
4. Deleuze, G., Tomlinson, H., & Galeta, R. (1989). Cinema 2: The time-image. University of Minnesota Press.
5. Habib, A. (2010). “La rue est entrée dans la chambre!”: Mai 68, la rue et l’intimité dans The Dreamers et Les amants réguliers. Cinémas. Revue d’études cinématographiques.
6. Jacobs, S. (2012). “Semiotics of the Living Room: Domestic Interiors in Chantal Akerman’s Cinema” in Chantal Akerman: Too Far, Too Close. Ludion/MUHKA, Antwerp.
7. Lacan, J., Sheridan, A., & Miller, J. (1998[1964]). The four fundamental concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan book xi. W. W. Norton & Company, New York.
8. Lacan, J. (1953). Le symbolique, l’imaginaire et le réel. éditeur non identifié.
9. Lacan, J. (1977[1957]). Écrits: A Selection. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Tavistock Publications, London.
10. Lacan, J. (2001[1949]). The mirror stage as formative of the function of the / as revealed in psychoanalytic experience. Écrits: A Selection, 16–23. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995839-7>.
11. Lacan, J., & Miller, J.-A. (1988). The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. W. W. Norton & Company, New York.
12. Lacan, J. (1991). The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I. W. W. Norton & Company, New York.
13. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). Le visible et l’invisible. Gallimard.

14. Sharma, P., & Barua, A. (2016). Analysing gaze in terms of subjective and objective interpretation: Sartre and Lacan. *Human Studies*, 40(1), 61–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-016-9406-4>.
15. Valle Corpas, I. (2021). Between home and flight: Interior space, time and desire in the films of Chantal Akerman. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2021.1914969>.
16. White, K. (2010). Urban Unknown: Chantal Akerman in New York City. *Screen* 51 (4): 365–378. doi:10.1093/screen/hjq030.
17. Zizek, S. (2009[1989]). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

