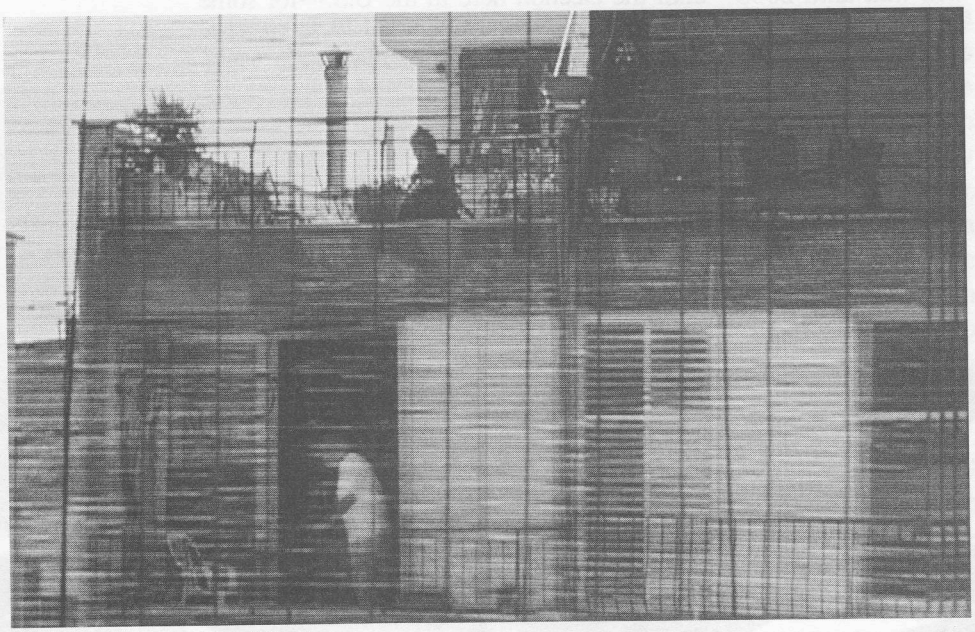
millennium
FILM JOURNAL

No. 51
Spring/Summer 2009

EXPERIMENTS IN DOCUMENTARY

Barbara Hammer, *Available Space* (1978-79)
PERFORMANCE AT NWAA, PORTLAND, 1979, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

■ ARTICLES



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
PUBLICITY STILL.

GHOSTED DOCUMENTARY

CHANTAL AKERMAN'S LÀ-BAS

GREG YOUMANS

> *"I don't feel like I belong, and that's without real pain, without pride. Pride happens. No, I'm just disconnected, from practically everything. I have a few anchors, and sometimes I let them go or they let me go, and I drift. That's most of the time. Sometimes I hang on for a few days, minutes, seconds, then I let go again. I can hardly look. I can hardly hear. Semi-blind, semi-deaf, I float. Sometimes I sink. But not quite. Something, sometimes a detail, brings me back to the surface, and I start floating again..."*[1]

Chantal Akerman's digital video *Là-bas* (*Down There*, 2006) contemplates the legacy of the Holocaust on the daily lives of Jewish people, including Akerman, in and around a Tel Aviv apartment building. By focusing on the contemporary impact of historical trauma, *Là-bas* builds on the earlier films and videos of Akerman's documentary series.[2] In all of these works she eschews the standard cinematic techniques for historical reflection, notably the use of archival footage, in favor of a patient discovery of the signs of the past where they mark the present: the hundreds of anonymous portraits that become post-Soviet landscape in *D'Est* (*From the East*, 1993),[3] the final tracking shot of the East Texas road along which James Byrd Jr.'s body was dragged in *Sud* (*South*, 1999), and the slow meditation on the place where desert meets fence along the U.S.-Mexico border in *De l'autre côté* (*From the Other Side*, 2002). The camera of *Là-bas* is similarly trained on the here and now: for most of the video it gazes out the window of Akerman's apartment at the inhabitants of the building across the way. However, the content of *Là-bas* is more expressly personal than that of the preceding documentaries. In the voiceover, Akerman reflects on the significance for her family of both the Holocaust and Israel. Among Northern European Jews, Israel is often imagined as a paradise that awaits *là-bas*, and much of the video is about the inability of the country to provide the solace one hopes to find there. Heavy with subjectivity and memory, Akerman's words cannot be reconciled with the video's dispassionate and presentist visual track.

1 *Là-bas* exists in both French and English-language versions; Akerman speaks the voiceover of both. This epigraph is taken from the voiceover of the English-language version.

2 At the time of this writing, *Là-bas* is on view in the U.S. as an installation in *Chantal Akerman: Moving Through Time and Space*, a major touring exhibition (2008–2009) of her documentary series. I saw *Là-bas* in a different presentation format, theatrically screened three times in Paris between October 2006 and March 2007. The specificity of my viewing context—on a big screen, from start to finish, in a darkened theater, rather than on a monitor, looped, in a gallery setting—no doubt determines my analysis of the video.

3 For an eloquent discussion of the relationship between faces and landscape in *D'Est*, and of that film's insistence on the present, see Alisa Lebow, "Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman's *D'Est*." *Camera Obscura* 52 (2003): 34-83.

Greg Youmans *is a Ph.D. candidate in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His dissertation explores French and American gay and lesbian filmmaking of the late 1970s.*

As the epigraph to this essay suggests, Akerman is not simply *haunted* by the Holocaust, but *ghosted* by it. And one of the main feats of her video is to convey this particular affective state to the viewer. As we watch *Là-bas,* we do not experience an intense affective charge due to the eruption of past figures and impressions into our mundane present—the experience of haunting. Rather, we experience the opposite: the draining of affect and interpersonal connection from daily existence under the weight of unresolved and perhaps irresolvable historical and political events—the experience of ghosting.[4] In *Là-bas,* this emptying out of affect, occurring as it does within so politically charged a landscape as contemporary Israel, becomes, paradoxically, deeply poignant.

4 I will often deploy the presumptive "we" in my discussion of spectatorship in *Là-bas.* I prefer this to an abstract and impersonal construction, such as "the viewer," because I am convinced that the power of Akerman's video derives from its interpellation of the viewer (us) despite that viewer's (our) possible, in some instances even likely, resistance.

In an essay on the films *Yanzhi Kou* (*Rouge*, 1987) and *Haplos* (*Caress*, 1982), Bliss Lim presents the temporal dynamic of haunting as it is usually understood: "The ghost narratives in *Rouge* and *Haplos* function as an allegorical frame in which an almost-forgotten history becomes newly meaningful as a kind of haunting or ghostly return. These ghost films draw from their respective cultural discourses in order to vivify the *present's* accountability to the concerns of the *past*, and in so doing call into question the ways in which modern homogeneous time conceives of those very temporal categories."[5] But as I will show in this essay, *Là-bas* is a "ghost film" that works through a different principle than haunting as ghostly return. By insisting always on the present and by privileging spatial juxtapositions over temporal ones, the video rejects the liberal fantasy of haunting: any possibility of forgiveness, redemption, or healing through communion with the past is foreclosed.

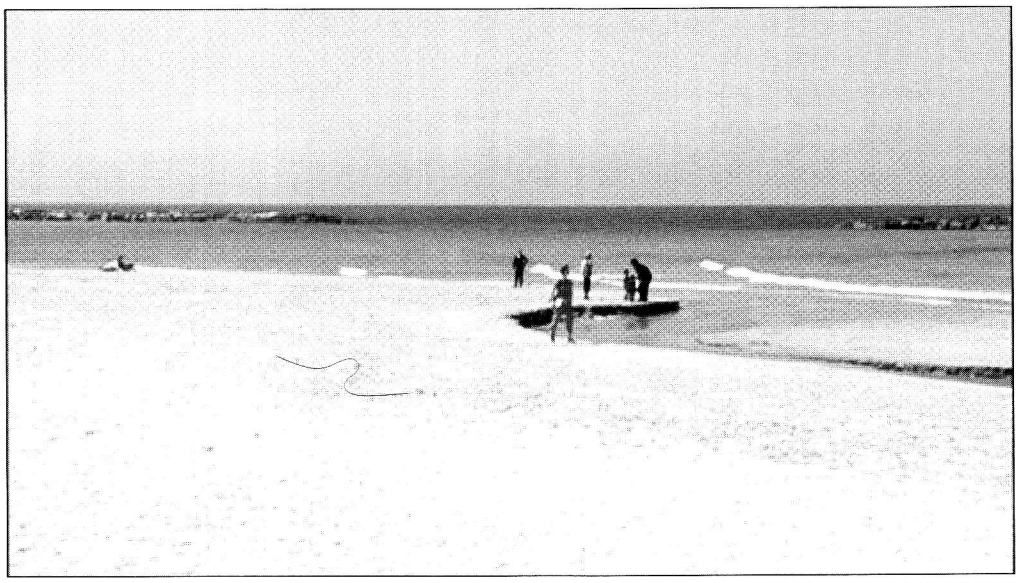
5 Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film As Historical Allegory." *Positions* 9, no. 2 (2001): 289.

Scholarship on haunting has long insisted that the occasion of the ghost demands an intersectional analysis of ethics and affect, and *Là-bas* is no exception.[6] Here too we are confounded by a twin sense of ethical imperative and ethical impossibility. But in *Là-bas* this sensation derives not from communion with the dead, but rather from the uncanny feeling that, like the woman in the apartment, we might no longer be able to communicate with the living. Watching *Là-bas,* we become ghosts—ghosts who, most disturbingly, cannot materialize. In what follows I will try to account for the power of this unusual "ghost film" through a series of interconnected discussions of the video's *mise-en-scène*, its generic location, and its construction of spectatorship.

6 For paradigm-setting work on haunting, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

A Room With A View

One of the most unusual and oft-remarked aspects of *Là-bas* is that Akerman and her camera almost never venture outside. During most of the video, both are restricted to the interior of the apartment she rented during a brief stay in Tel Aviv. The only exceptions are two short sequences on a beach and a few shots from the apartment's roof-

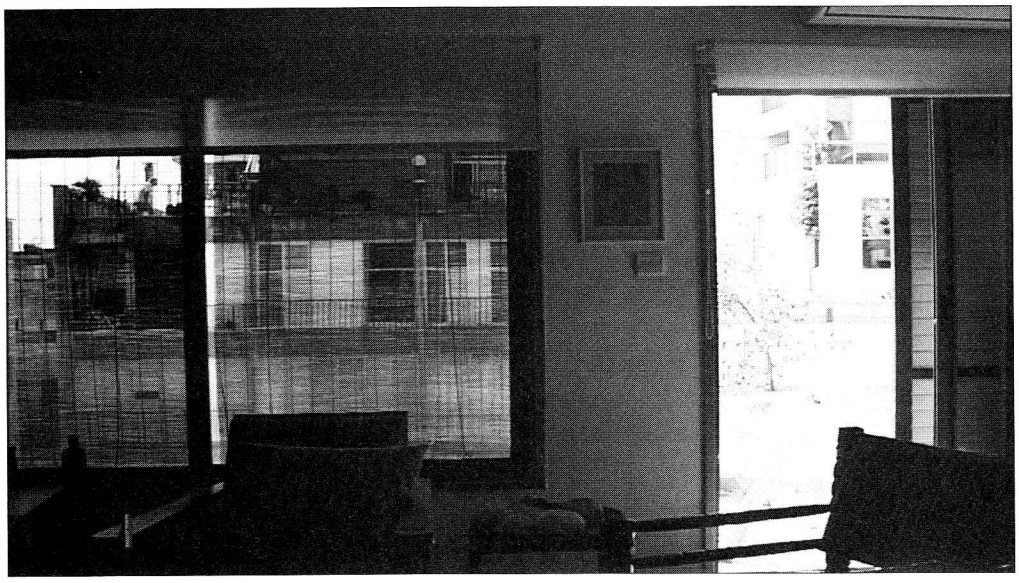


Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
PUBLICITY STILL.

top terrace, from which the sea is also visible. In this way, *Là-bas* evinces Akerman's return to the intensive apartment compositions of her early work; however, there is a difference. As Ivone Margulies has discussed, in Akerman's earliest films, such as *Saute Ma Ville* (*Blow Up My Town*, 1968) and *Je Tu Il Elle* (*I You He She*, 1973), rooms play a role akin to the stage in feminist body-art performances of the same era, demarcating an experimental frame in which the performer reiterates and disrupts the conventions and practices of everyday life. Margulies stresses the importance of the relationship between these "Akerman-chambers" and the outside world. "It is always the act of isolation *from another space* that brings into sharp focus Akerman's themes and aesthetics."[7] In Akerman's films and videos before *Là-bas*, the relationship between secluded, performative interior spaces on the one hand and more naturalistic, populated spaces on the other is almost always constructed temporally, through editing. That is, the protagonist, and the viewer along with her, spends time in the Akerman-chamber before or after time spent elsewhere. In *Là-bas*, by contrast, the relationship is constructed spatially: one is always *in* the room while simultaneously looking *out* the window. Both spaces are visible throughout most of the 78-minute video.

Là-bas occupies a hybrid generic space, caught between documentary and art cinema. In itself this does not distinguish the video within Akerman's oeuvre. What is novel about *Là-bas* is that it embeds this generic ambivalence within the *mise-en-scène* and then deploys it as a primary formal strategy. In *Là-bas,* the ethically charged outside world—the shared lifeworld of viewer, videomaker, and subject (the space of documentary)—is constantly juxtaposed but never integrated with the interior space of the apartment, an otherworldly space where things happen differently (the space of art

7 Ivone Margulies, "La Chambre Akerman: The Captive as Creator," *Rouge* <http://www.rouge.com.au/10/akerman.html> (Dec. 2006, accessed 11 Jan. 2008). See also Margulies' book-length study of Akerman, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
PUBLICITY STILL.

cinema). Caught in this divided and impossible-to-integrate *mise-en-scène*, the viewer must negotiate the experience of a video that is at once profoundly about Israel and inexcusably, unjustifiably, not. I will expand on this point in the next section, where I will consider at length questions of ethics and genre.

What most distinguishes the interior world from the exterior world of *Là-bas,* spatially *and* generically, are the human presences occupying each. In the experimental space of the apartment we find, or struggle to find, "Akerman." Sounds indicate a presence in the room—we hear footsteps and typing—and at moments we catch sight of a shadowy figure floating along the edge of the frame or reflected darkly in a mirror. It is soon established that this figure is the source of the off-screen voice, which we hear only briefly, during three phone conversations as she politely refuses invitations from friends to leave the apartment. The same voice provides the video's voiceover, which engages themes of suicide, confinement, and family through a sparse series of anecdotes and observations that drift back and forth between the general and the personal, the exceptional and the banal. To give one example, the seemingly idiosyncratic statement that simply leaving the house to buy bread and toilet paper is for her an act of heroism takes on added weight next to statements about her family history (an aunt in Brussels who became more and more reclusive before eventually committing suicide) and references to the dangers of life in Israel (a bombing that occurred not far from the apartment during her stay there).

Contrary to these primarily aural indications of the presence of "Akerman" within the apartment, the camera remains fixed on the windows, across which thin matchstick blinds have

been drawn. These blinds are thin enough to permit light to enter and the camera (and us) to see out, though they prevent people outside from seeing in. In his curatorial essay on *Là-bas*, Bill Arning speaks eloquently of the function and formal properties of these blinds. Observing that the interior of the apartment is underexposed and the exterior often somewhat overexposed (as evident in a few shots where we see naked white light spilling in through the open door leading onto the balcony), he notes that the blinds in fact enable us to see out the window more clearly. In this sense, "what blocks our view actually allows us to see better."[8] Moreover, the blinds constantly bring our attention back to the liminal status of the window, and by extension, the inside/outside dichotomy that structures the entire video.

8 Bill Arning, "*Down There* (*Là-bas*)," in *Chantal Akerman: Moving Through Time and Space*, ed. Terrie Sultan (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2008): 42.

Through these blinds, in shots lasting anywhere from thirty seconds to eight minutes, we observe people in the apartment building across the street. These neighbors do not evince the reclusiveness, pensivity, and trauma of the woman in the apartment. In contrast to the deep subjectivity saturating the room, the people outside are viewed with a distanced documentary objectivity. Akerman's signature static long takes represent them with what might be interpreted as direct-cinema non-interference and ethnographic rigor. Of course, any such interpretation must also account for the continued intervention of the blinds and for the denial of close framings to these people across the way, who always remain restricted to a small fraction of the screen. Through the layering of all of these aligned tensions—inside/outside, sound/vision, subjectivity/objectivity, self/world, art cinema/documentary—*Là-bas* draws us into a deeply conflicted spectatorial experience.

At the Threshold of Documentary

Since first viewing *Là-bas*, I have become convinced that my ethical response to the video has determined all other aspects of my relationship to it—critical, aesthetic, and affective. As such, I would like to attend carefully to the video's ethical dimensions here; however, I would like to do so without my analysis boiling down to an ideological critique of *Là-bas* or a simple condemnation or celebration of its maker. To avoid this, I must work against the usual ways ethics is discussed in relation to film and video: that is, as something that occurs at the stage of production, *before* viewing, and which a viewer or critic then evaluates and adjudicates *after* seeing the work. This model cannot account for the ways ethical tension is sown into the very fabric of *Là-bas*, nor for how this tension charges the air in the theater, alternately entreating, provoking, soothing, and disturbing the viewer. The video orchestrates a confrontation between the ethical demands of an exterior documentary space and the self-contained reflexivity of an inte-

rior art-cinematic space. As a consequence, the accomplishments of *Là-bas* derive as much from its ethical strategies as from its aesthetic ones, and the two can never be pulled apart. How, then, might we approach the ethics of a film or video in a way more akin to how we are used to approaching its form, which is to say as its very foundation and substance?

Documentary solicits a particularly *ethical* response from the viewer, more so than any other cinematic genre or practice. As Vivian Sobchack has argued, because documentary images are perceived to take place in the life-world that the viewer shares with both the documentary maker and the onscreen subjects, the behavior of that maker vis-à-vis that world and those subjects meets with intense ethical scrutiny and judgment on the part of the viewer, in a way that the director, diegetic world, and characters of a fiction film do not.[9] As a supplement to Sobchack's analysis, I insist that the expressly subjective, reflexive, and personal content of much non-fictional art cinema also largely escapes this ethical scrutiny, precisely because in these works attention is shifted from the fraught ethics of documentary encounter to the autonomous space of individual experience.

In my response to Akerman's video, I frequently deemed it ethically unjustifiable as a *documentary* about Israel. Put bluntly, I was disturbed that a documentary about contemporary Israel could have so little to say about Palestinians. Were *Là-bas* more declaredly a personal film, an essay film, an art film—all the terms that have been used to point to films and videos that, among other projects, work against documentary's traditional claims of truth, formal transparency, and regard toward the outside world—were it a video that put itself forward as being ostensibly and primarily about Akerman's subjectivity, family history, sense of exile, confinement, and alienation, my ethical response to it would be different. To the extent that *Là-bas* becomes that video, a profound meditation on what Israel represents and *feels like* for a Northern European Jew whose family history is indelibly marked by the trauma of the Holocaust, my ethical response to it already is different. No one film or video and no one film- or videomaker need or could take a definitive view on a subject as broad and complex as contemporary Israel. Because American audiences are most familiar with Akerman's experimental films of the 1970s, they are likely predisposed to receive *Là-bas* as art cinema and to approach the video in this way. Indeed, in the video's combination of personally-themed voiceover and oddly depersonalized, outwardly-directed camerawork, it has a strong resemblance to Akerman's 1977 film *News From Home*, a film that is seldom if ever labeled "documentary."

However, *Là-bas* bills itself as a documentary.[10] Despite its many refusals of the formal transparency often associated with

9 Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary" in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226–257.

10 For instance, the film won the Grand Prize at the International Competition at the 2006 International Festival of Documentary in Marseilles.

that practice, many of *Là-bas*'s elements—travel to an unfamiliar place, a stated desire to understand the culture and political situation there, a professed ethnographic interest in the people in front of the camera, the topicality of the work's subject matter—cast the video as documentary. Further encouraging an engagement with *Là-bas* at the threshold of documentary, Akerman's account of making the video suggests that it indeed has, or would like to have, something to say about the current situation in Israel:

When X.C. [producer Xavier Carniaux] proposed that I make a film on Israel, I immediately had the impression that it was a bad idea. An impossible idea even. Almost paralyzing. Almost nauseating.

He told me that one understands nothing there. It is from you that one waits for something. Me, no, I don't want to. There's nothing to wait for from me.

I spoke to Xavier of my resistance and only my resistance. My scruples. I was afraid that I would burn my fingers and my reason, afraid of the obstacles presented by my subjectivity, which on this particular subject seemed dangerous, confused. As for neutrality, it does not exist. It could only be false.

But the worm was in the fruit, and I set off down there [*là-bas*].[11]

In these few lines, the tension between documentary and art cinema is already at play, evident in the expressed conflict between the producer's and the videomaker's conceptions of the project and its significance. However much Akerman insists on her subjective relationship to Israel and the impossibility of political neutrality, the auteurist framing spins these qualities into the very stuff of definitiveness. *Là-bas* becomes her idiosyncratic and highly personal, and for that all the more profound and enlightening, "film on Israel."

I am certainly not alone in expecting a "film on Israel" to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What has repeatedly provoked me in *Là-bas* is its politics of presence and absence around the key players in this conflict. The video never explicitly discusses or engages with Palestinians, with the arguable exception of the voiceover mention of the bombing down the street and subsequent statements concerning the protagonist's feelings of insecurity. One might insist that the sense of confinement running throughout the video thematizes the anxiety and danger of life in Tel Aviv during the Second Intifada, and therefore constantly foregrounds the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But this sense of confinement runs throughout Akerman's work; it is not isolated to this video. Moreover, in *Là-bas,* this confinement is made to point as much—more so, I think—to the reclusive aunt in Brussels as to the bombing down the street. It is the legacy of the Holocaust among European Jews, rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that lies at the video's heart. And *Là-bas* suggests that the conflict with the Palestinians is not the only, not even the primary, reason why Israel is not the paradise it is made out to be within the Jewish diaspora.

11 Quoted from the press booklet at http://www.shellac-altern.org/labas.html. English translation by the author.

What is equally troubling, and perhaps more surprising, about *Là-bas* is that the Israeli Jews who purportedly *are* its subject are caught on video but never really encountered. To borrow a term from Roland Barthes's meditation on still photography, these Israeli Jews are the video's *studium*, the site of professed meaning and cultural interest in and around the work.[12] In the press booklet interview, as well as during the Q&A after an October 2006 screening in Paris, Akerman repeatedly evoked her "fascination" with the people in the apartment across the way. The overwhelming amount of screen *time* devoted to these people certainly corroborates her paratextual insistence on their importance. But as already indicated, the politics of screen *space* around these figures seems to belie this interest: they are left small in the frame and constantly obscured by the blinds. In this way the *studium* of *Là-bas* is paradoxically *disregarded*. The video's gaze upon its professed subjects is neither voyeuristic nor engaged, but nor is it quite indifferent.

12 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981).

Caught between absent Palestinians and disregarded Israeli Jews, I found myself watching *Là-bas* with profound ambivalence. And yet something in the video moved me. Something that I have had no end of trouble identifying and isolating has managed to affect me deeply. Barthes's term for this "something" is the *punctum*, that which leaps out and wounds him in a particularly powerful photograph, that which is *poignant*. For Barthes, the *punctum* is always highly personal: it is his idiosyncratic connection to the photograph, neither generalizable to others nor intended by the artist. In most of his examples, Barthes locates the *punctum* flying under the radar of the photograph's *studium*, and he proceeds to commune with the former in spite of and even *out of spite for* the latter. It is always Barthes, the spectator, who disregards the *studium* in order to revel in the *punctum*. I am tempted to follow Barthes's lead, to turn my back on the "noise" in and around *Là-bas*—Akerman's professed intentions and the video's strange relationship to its "content"—and to accept that those moments in the video that have moved me must be mine alone.

Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE BY AUTHOR; DVD COURTESY OF THE MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY.

But *Là-bas* does not allow for this kind of reading. I am not the one disregarding the video's *studium*, *she* is. The woman in the apartment orchestrates the video's structuring tension between proper meaning and improper action. She seems to know that *Là-bas* will take power in its unjustified disregard for its professed subjects, that it will gain in force by soliciting traditional documentary expectations of encounter and explanation and then failing to deliver on them. Every step I have made in my journey with *Là-bas* has found me struggling to turn my gaze upon the elusive woman in the apartment.

Ghosting the Spectator

When queried in the press-booklet interview about the video's bunker-like sense of confinement, Akerman replies, "I am a child of the second generation. This explains that."[13] But this statement can hardly account for the *feeling* of confinement in *Là-bas*. It is not through the clarity or succinctness of Akerman's explanations, provided either paratextually or in the video's voiceover, that *Là-bas* reaches the viewer. If in watching the video I have come to feel what Akerman seems to feel, what she seems to ask me to feel, this does not mean that I have *understood* her experience as a "child of the second generation"—I who am not a child of a survivor of the camps, I who do not comprehend why this sense of confinement should be that of the children rather than of the survivors themselves. *Là-bas* affects me, rather, because distance from the world, the fruitless desire to identify with others, the non-voyeuristic compulsion to look, and the impossibility of belonging become not merely themes of the video but structural to the very experience of watching it. As we watch we take on these conditions, whether or not we understand, whether or not we approve, whether or not we might wish to identify, or otherwise think we could identify, with this particular videomaker.

13 Original quotation in French. Translation by Youmans.

Watching *Là-bas,* we awaken in a strange room to an unfamiliarly disempowered way of seeing. We find ourselves caught between two sites of human presence, the videomaker behind us and the distant, semi-obscured people across the way, both of whom remain just out of full view. Akerman conveys her message to us, not through identification or the suturing of our gaze to her own but rather, through the perpetually restaged denial of any such identification or suture. Each shot in *Là-bas* is clearly marked, charged with the artist's vision, but across the duration of each take this sense of the artist's presence slowly fades away. We are granted her vision but not her gaze; it is as if the woman in the apartment is not saying, "Look at this with me," but rather "This is what I have to look at." As our eyes fix on and through the window, the video repeatedly indicates that behind us she is doing other things: pacing, typing, washing dishes, brushing her teeth, answering the phone. Paralleling the video's disregard for

its *studium*, those people in the apartment across the way, is the videomaker's disinvestment in the camera, and, by extension, in us. In these ways it is established early on that neither identification nor possession, neither empathy nor understanding, are possible here—however much they may be desired, solicited, even insisted upon throughout the video.

Since the mid-1990s scholars have explored the ethics and temporality of haunting: how to exist as a living, and thus privileged, human being among the dead of the past, the dying of the present, and the not-yet-born of the future, all of whom make demands on us. But Akerman's video presents less an ethics of being-with-ghosts than the ethical quandary of being a ghost. At first sight "Akerman" appears to haunt the room, but before long we find ourselves haunting it with her, only to discover by the end, most traumatically, that neither of us are in fact haunting that space at all. In order to haunt, one's presence must be felt by the worldly beings with whom one is trying to communicate. But as we look at the people in the apartment across the way, those documentary subjects who go about their days unaware that a videomaker and a spectator would like to encounter them, to understand them, and to care about them, we experience what it is to be a ghost who cannot haunt. If the scholarship on haunting insists that the traumas of the past continue to be felt through the agency of the dead, then *Là-bas* shows us that past trauma can also make ghosts of the living.

The author thanks Barbara Epstein, Scheherazade Ehya, Carla Freccero, Peter Limbrick, Nguyen Tan Hoang, Kalindi Vora, and editors Lucas Hilderbrand and Lynne Sachs for comments on this essay, and Bill Arning of the MIT List Visual Arts Center and Leslie Nolan of the Marian Goodman Gallery for research assistance.