

Countering the Disadvantage: Stasis as an Emancipatory Minimalist Legacy in Chantal Akerman's Cinema

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Abstract:

This article examines stasis in Chantal Akerman's cinema by means of a genealogical study into its minimalist origins in order to make visible its political operability in her work and, by extension, its inherent political potential. Stasis is an aesthetic effect generated through the use of repetition, seriality, and duration in temporal media that proliferated in Minimalism across artforms and was taken up by Akerman during her *séjour* in New York in the early 1970s. The characteristic endless temporality created by stasis in temporal media takes shape in Minimalism due in part to the movement's literalist, phenomenological orientation, which at one point caused Minimalist art to be regarded as nonideological – this while the static quality in Akerman's work appears to be constitutive of its political character. A study of her early films *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and *Je tu il elle* (1974), clearly influenced by the Minimalist scene she was immersed in, illustrates how stasis emerges analogously in Minimalist music, dance, and Akerman's cinema. Minimalism's paradigmatically phenomenological orientation and its intricate entwinement with stasis are examined in relation to Akerman's work to reveal their inherent potential for political operability in art.

Keywords: Minimalism; Akerman; stasis; structural film; repetition; duration.

In November 1971, at the age of 21, Chantal Akerman left for New York. Shortly after moving there, she contacted Babette Mangolte, who would eventually become the cinematographer for a number of her films and

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immediately introduced her to artists and works from the Minimalist avant-garde (Bergstrom, 2019, pp. 31–32). While the Minimalist events Akerman attended were not limited to film screenings, the structural films of the time clearly left an impression; she mentions Michael Snow's *La region centrale* (*The Central Region*, 1971) as “a revelation” in an interview four decades later (Brenez, 2011, p. 36) and reminisces on this early period of her life as a director in an autobiographical essay, where she asserts: “in my way I was, no doubt, marked for ever” (Akerman, 2004/2005, p. 140). This self-evaluation regarding the lasting influence of structural cinema seems to be further confirmed by the many critics who have researched the connection between her aesthetics and those of structural film. Akerman's use of structural film conventions, particularly in her early work, namely in *La chambre* (*The Room*, 1972), *Hotel Monterey* (1972), *Je tu il elle* (*I You She He*, 1974) and *News From Home* (1976) has frequently been noted (see for example Margulies, 1996, p. 43; White, 2010, p. 372; Jacobs, 2012, pp. 73–76). Akerman's Minimalist-informed use of duration is addressed in several studies (for example in Fowler, 1995, p. 146; Margulies, 1996, p. 3) and even forms the central point of interest regarding Akerman's work in Michael Walsh's recent book on durational cinema (2022). A number of critics have acknowledged how Akerman's early engagement with structural film aesthetics would go on to determine her aesthetics throughout her oeuvre, even as she shifted towards more narrative work, namely with reference to *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) (Margulies, 1996, p. 5; Jacobs, 2012, pp. 75–76) and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (*The Meetings of Anna*, 1978) (Fowler, 1995, pp. 159–160).

There was a great deal of interaction between artists from various disciplines within the Minimalist avant-garde (see Strickland, 1993; Lista et al., 2017) and Akerman not only encountered the work of various filmmakers like Snow and Hollis Frampton (Fowler, 1995, p. 123), but was exposed to Minimalism across various artforms, including dance and performance art (Margulies, 1996, p. 48) and Minimalist music (Bergstrom, 2019, pp. 32, 39). When taking into consideration the lasting influence Akerman's stay in New York would have on her aesthetics, it is helpful to consider the interactions and shared concerns of the various disciplines of the Minimalist avant-garde.¹ This is not only because, as

1 The works of Gregory Battcock (1968), James Meyer (2001) and Edward Strickland (1993) provide significant historical insight into the Minimalist avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s and its shared concerns and strategies across disciplines. When referring to Minimalism, I adhere to Strickland's definition of Minimalism, in which he

Peter Gidal indicates, the Minimalist art movement had a significant influence on the development of structural film aesthetics (1976/1978, p. 8) but also because Akerman's immersion in the broader Minimalist scene, including dance, performance, and music, would leave its marks on her aesthetics, as has been argued by Ivone Margulies (1996, p. 50), whose monograph on the filmmaker, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, inventories many of the Minimalist traces in Akerman's work. To elaborate on the overlap between Minimalism across disciplines and structural film would exceed the scope of this article, but Margulies's observation of shared "strategies of real-time representation, repetition, and seriality" gives an adequate impression of some of the more striking affinities (1996, p. 50).

Due to Minimalism's preoccupation with material and form over content, and its deliberate refusal of subjective expression and relational composition, many critics in its heyday described it as "nonideological", given that it was considered "altogether minimal in content, a zero degree of art" (Foster, 1996, p. 56). Although the contemporary perspective on Minimalism does not take its muteness at face value as indicating an ahistorical, nonideological, or politically neutral character (Foster, 1996, pp. 62–66), the fact of its abstraction from "history, language, sexuality, and power", criticised in the 1970s and 80s, remains (Foster, 1996, p. 43). Despite the political critique that has been recognised in Minimalist art in relation to its context of emergence, its formal characteristics do not appear to carry any *inherent* political potential due to their adherence to asceticism and minimal content to approximate objectivity.² Significant in this respect is the literalist quality of Minimalism: the radical nonreferentiality of Minimalist art by means of which a phenomenological emphasis is placed on the material surface of the work – a quality recognised by Margulies in the cinema of Akerman (1996, pp. 6, 97). While having incorporated many Minimalist aesthetic strategies, Akerman's cinema is widely recognised and categorised as political (for example by Rodowick [1988/1994, p. 2] and Walsh [2022]), with a wide array of feminist criticism noting that Akerman uses structural film conventions in her political cinema (see for example McHugh, 1999; Thornham, 2019; Corpas, 2021, p. 8). However, these political perspectives often seem to be informed by the subject of the films in question and specifically the attention to the everyday and female subjectivity present

denotes several key characteristics including "stasis", "resistan[ce] to development", and "emphasis on surfaces" (1993, p. 7).

2 The quest for objectivity is a central characteristic of Minimalist art across disciplines, as noted by Strickland (1993, p. 78) and Meyer (2009, pp. 150–151).

in Akerman's cinema (Simon, 2017; Mulvey, 2018; Maury, 2018) – with only some discussing Akerman's preoccupation with the everyday in relation to its probable origin in Minimalism (Margulies, 1996, p. 50). In other words, the films' subject matter and themes rather than the formal characteristics of structural film Akerman takes up, such as duration and repetition, frequently predominate in these political interpretations.

As Akerman's cinema incorporated particular Minimalist aesthetic strategies which she would continue to use far removed from their original historical context – the very late modernist context in relation to which their radical asceticism and self-reflexivity is considered political rather than art for art's sake – the question emerges whether this aesthetic legacy can still be considered political outside of its context of emergence. In other words, is there an inherent political potential to certain aesthetic strategies developed within the Minimalist movement that transcends its historical context and remains operative in the work of its successors?³ Temporality in Akerman's cinema is often addressed in feminist criticism; Laura Mulvey goes as far as stating that duration was perhaps especially significant for feminist experimental filmmakers in the 1970s (2018, p. 89). In Walsh's recent study of durational cinema (2022), he situates the origin of duration as a defining characteristic in cinema aesthetics in the 1960s New York Minimalist avant-garde and indicates how the use of duration subsequently was taken up by a political second wave in Europe after 1968. He includes Akerman's New York films in the second category while acknowledging the in-between position she had between the European Nouvelle Vague and the Minimalist avant-garde (pp. 8–9, 87), previously noted by Peter Wollen (1981, p. 9). Although Walsh situates the origin of durational film in Minimalism and observes its subsequent uptake and proliferation in a characteristically *political* European avant-garde, he never goes as far as trying to analyse what the political operability of duration in the second wave might be, instead situating its political character in subject matter and themes and, with regard to *mise-en-scène*, in their chosen locations (2022, pp. 92–93).

Whereas Walsh addresses duration in Akerman's films, my aim is to offer a perspective on the *static* temporality of Akerman's work (of which

3 It should be noted here that I adhere to Margulies's position that “no formal strategy can be essentially feminist, anti-illusionist, or political” (1996, p. 7), articulated in her monograph on Akerman in reaction to a body of criticism which seems to suggest the opposite (pp. 6–7). However, as will become clear, I do assume a political *potential* (rather than an essence) inherent in stasis as an aesthetic strategy, which I situate in the shift in the subject-object relationship constituted in Minimalism, thus proposing an elective affinity of sorts between stasis and political operability in cinema.

the durational aspect is a subpart) as a Minimalist aesthetic strategy in relation to the political character of her cinema. Stasis is an effect common in Minimalism generated through the use of repetition, seriality, and duration in temporal media, in which the temporal experience is stagnated in favor of a literalist emphasis on the surface level of the work. In alignment with Walsh's history of duration in cinema, I situate the origin of stasis in cinema – as I treat it within the scope of this article – within the Minimalist avant-garde in which structural film took part. However, Justin Remes, in his book *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis*, situates the origin of *static cinema* in the 1930 film *Wochenende* (*Weekend*) by Walter Ruttmann (2015, p. 4). Given the genealogical nature of my study, I adhere to the moment of interdisciplinary convergence and exchange that Minimalism formed to develop an understanding of stasis in cinema as a specifically Minimalist aesthetic legacy, thereby reframing the static cinema that Minimalism produced with respect to Remes's study.

This article offers a detailed perspective on the defining endless temporality discernible in Akerman's aesthetics, as this particular temporality or static quality reemerges again and again in criticism as a central concern in both Minimalist art and the filmmaker's work. The proposed hypothesis is that the primordially Minimalist stasis incorporated in Akerman's aesthetics carries an inherent political potential which can to a significant extent be regarded as constitutive of the political character attributed to her cinema. In other words, the literalist, phenomenological orientation of Minimalism that alters the spectator's temporal experience and at one point caused the art movement to be regarded as nonideological, is here assumed to fulfill an ideological purpose within her work. A study of her early films, clearly influenced by the Minimalist scene she was immersed in, *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and *Je tu il elle* (1974), illustrates how stasis emerges analogously in Minimalist music, dance, and Akerman's cinema. Subsequently, Minimalism's paradigmatically phenomenological orientation and its intricate entwinement with this "endless" static temporality will be addressed to illustrate how Akerman's films make visible its inherent potential for political operability.

Stasis: Spatialising Time to Counter the Disadvantage

Static music proliferated from the emergence of Serialism from the 1920s onward and was influential in the later development of Minimalist music (Strickland, 1993, p. 120), which in turn is likely to have been responsible for the introduction of stasis in other temporal media in the Minimalist avant-garde, as a number of Minimalist composers went on to collaborate

with Minimalist artists and choreographers (Lista et al., 2017, p. 62; Strickland, 1993, p. 136). While the use of seriality in the form of phrasal repetition often seemed to develop in parallel across various art practices (Strickland, 1993, p. 19), and it is hard to appoint a single origin for these artistic strategies, it seems reasonable to suggest that the crossdisciplinary artistic meeting spaces that were at the origins of Minimalism led to artistic crosspollination and facilitated the migration of seriality from music to dance. Especially between temporal disciplines such as music, dance, video art, and film, there appears to have occurred an exchange of means to achieve a form of literalism through the spatialisation of the temporal.⁴

Both Serialist and Minimalist compositions provide an abundance of instances of stasis in music. To speak of stasis in reference to a temporal medium, historically characterised by a clear sense of progression or narrativity, appears counterintuitive. As listeners distinguish between and correlate various temporal musical units or combinations of musical elements within a composition, that composition is experienced as a temporal development. Combinations of recurring themes and variations enable the audience to notice a progression through time (Woodward, 2012, p. 6). However, through a particular treatment of musical temporality and texture, it is possible to achieve musical stasis: music that is “temporally undifferentiated” thereby resulting “in a single present stretched out into an enormous duration, a potentially infinite ‘now’” (Woodward, 2012, p. 6).

With regard to stasis in film, Remes offers the first extensive study of static cinema, a tradition that knew a great proliferation in the Minimalist and Fluxus avant-garde (2015, p. 4). He indicates that the cinema of stasis is generally characterised by an absence of “camera movement and little or no movement within the frame” (p. 3) and that, as a result, “it subverts the spectatorial expectations of movement and dynamism that are so central to most films” (p. 67). Remes briefly addresses the origins of stasis in Serial and Minimalist music in a number of passages (see for example pp. 31, 29), without, however, elaborating on how exactly stasis is generated analogously in music and cinema. The following paragraphs

⁴ Video-artist Bruce Nauman, for example, became fascinated by the work of early Minimalist composers, namely Young and Riley, but also Philip Glass and Steve Reich in 1968. His contemporary, filmmaker Lizzie Borden, described the Minimalist influences in Nauman's work as follows: “His studio activities, sometimes dealing with rhythmic patterning, reflect the serial repetition of this music, which does away with the sense of duration while intensifying one's awareness of the moment” (1975, p. 79).

further investigate this while giving due attention to the key role of Minimalist conventions when it comes to stasis in the cinema of Akerman.

Two types of stasis can be discerned in the filmmaker's work. One is accomplished primarily on a macrolevel, across shots or across an entire film, such as *Hotel Monterey* (1972). The other manifests itself more locally, within shots, and is largely dependent on figure behaviour, as this article will illustrate with reference to *Je tu il elle* (1974). These types of stasis can be traced back to the aesthetic strategies characteristic of Minimalist music and Minimalist dance respectively.⁵ Consequently, I have opted to refer to the former type as compositional stasis and to the latter as choreographical stasis. However, it should be emphasised that both types of stasis emerge through the use of the same means (either duration or the repetition of similar content), by way of the same mechanism that distorts the possibility of perceiving temporal progression. Both thus lead to the same "effect" of a seeming endlessness or experiential stasis and both serve the same goal, namely creating a literalist emphasis on the surface level of the work. The introduction of these two terms simply allows the possibility to make visible the analogies between static music and cinema on the one hand, and the analogies between stasis in dance and cinema based on repetitive movements or stillness in figure behaviour on the other hand. *Hotel Monterey* serves as an example of compositional stasis and bears the closest resemblance to the structural film examples discussed by Remes and his general description of static cinema, which highlights the absence of dynamism in cinematography and mise-en-scène.

Hotel Monterey (1972) was filmed during Akerman's stay in New York in the early 1970s and clearly testifies to her engagement with structural film during that period. The film is silent and consists of a sequence of long takes that progress from the innocuous entrance hall of the titular welfare hotel, deep into the gloomy corridors of the building, to finally emerge on the hotel rooftop where the film is concluded with a panorama of the New York skyline. However, despite the progression illustrated by this brief description, the hour-long film is primarily characterised by sequential and highly similar compositions in long shots of nearly identical corridors. Jacobs situates the film's proximity to structural film in the way it constructs a "cinematic space by means of the rooms,

5 The term figure behaviour is introduced by Bordwell and Thompson in their book *Film Art* as a tool for or category within film analysis (2008, pp. 112, 238) and is used to denote the staging of the movement and the performance of figures (human, animal or animated) within the mise-en-scène (p. 132).

corridors, light and volumes that the camera registers" (2012, p. 76); its likeness in this respect to key works such as Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Peter Gidal's *Hall* (1969) is striking. The literalist quality of *Hotel Monterey* that connects it to structural film and broader Minimalist conventions can furthermore be defined by means of its use of duration (long takes with a static camera and slow camera movements that underline the cinematic apparatus in its process of registering space) and seriality (as the work consists in large part of a series of near-identical variations on a single composition). These Minimalist aesthetic strategies give the work its static quality.

To clarify how experiential stasis appears in cinema, it is useful to refer back to its theorisation in music. In essence, static music emerges when the boundaries of the sequential temporal units or segments of a composition become blurred or unclear because the units do not sufficiently vary in their internal musical texture, instead having a relative constancy of density and interrelations (Woodward, 2012, pp. 57–58). Simplified, stasis thus emerges where there is relatively minimal change across consecutive segments, because the lack of differentiation leads to an absence of reference points for the listener, making it impossible to discern a logical progression or predict future events (Woodward, 2012, pp. 66, 72). As such, perceptible, audible continuity is removed from the actual continuity of the unfolding musical event.

A similar mechanism operates in cinema given a number of analogous interventions in its *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing. The relative absence of variation within units described with regard to static music would then, in cinematic terms, be dependent on *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. In *Hotel Monterey* (1972), the former is characterised by mostly empty spaces with very few objects and figures included in the frame. As such, dynamism and internal differentiation within isolated shots are minimised due to the relative sparsity of figures. The film's cinematography is characterised by duration, as there is a clear preference for long takes, a static camera and very slow tracking shots, the use of similar compositions of uniform or interchangeable settings, and a preference for long and extreme long shots that appear to direct attention to the building or architecture rather than to its guests. Perhaps the most decisive aesthetic intervention when it comes to the static character of *Hotel Monterey* is its editing. The rhythm is slow and constant due to the continuous use of the long take and the lack of perceptible variation in shot length throughout. There are long sequences of shots with very little variation, showing similar content and compositions, which render the differentiation between shots minimal. These interventions result in an experiential endlessness, corresponding precisely to the

“potentially infinite ‘now’” of static music described by Woodward (2012, p. 6).

As previously noted, *Hotel Monterey* (1972) is largely unpopulated throughout the homonymous film, and figure behaviour is thus reduced to a minimum; notable exceptions include the opening scene, the scenes in and around the elevator, and a set of portraits of hotel guests in their rooms; the latter illustrate the first type of choreographical stasis. The static quality of human figures in *Hotel Monterey*'s portraits is fairly straightforward: the guests remain perfectly, unnaturally still as they are recorded for a prolonged time. Walsh has argued that the portrait of the gentleman in his hotel room chair “reads as though Akerman gave the sitter the same instruction that Warhol did with the *Screen Tests* (don't move) and that the camera loses interest the moment he is no longer able to comply”, as the cut immediately follows the moment the man wiggles his fingers, thereby interrupting his prolonged immobility (2022, p. 97). This first form of stasis within a shot is thus generated through stillness in terms of figure behaviour and duration, and further emphasised by the cinematography (static long take, long shot, planimetric compositions) and the editing (one coherent sequence).

The second type of choreographical stasis in Akerman's cinema, perceptible in *Je tu il elle* (1974), suggests the direct impact of Minimalist dance and performance on figure behaviour in her cinema, and consequently calls for a brief digression on the Minimalist dance practice of choreographer, dancer, and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer.⁶ In a text written in 1966, Rainer addressed her “radical elimination of phrasing and variation, two semantic procedures grounded in the tradition of the time-based arts that make it possible, in both dance and music, to follow an unfolding by means of repetition and progression” (1966/2017, p. 18). Instead of adhering to those procedures that led to “a flowing or developmental type of progression, [...] [a] continuity [...] connected, in my mind, with the lyric and the romantic” (Rainer, 1966/2017, p. 94), she actively challenged the “temporal writing” for a temporal medium “that erases its own traces in the perception of the viewer” (Lista, 2017, p. 18).⁷ Rainer was searching for the same stasis or spatialisation of time that was

6 In her monograph on Akerman, Ivone Margulies elaborates on “Akerman's debt to minimalist principles of cumulative seriality” (1996, p. 50) and Rainer's dance practice in particular, in her chapter “Toward a Corporeal Cinema Theatricality in the '70s” (pp. 42–64).

7 Rainer's statements are illustrative of the anti-Romantic quest for objectivity characteristic of Minimalism and its forerunner Serialism (Strickland, 1993, p. 128).

achieved in Minimalist music in order to make dance visible, as “dance is hard to see” (as cited in Lista, 2017, p. 18).

In yet another text named “Rreeppeettiittiioonn iinn mmyy Wwoorrk” (1965/2017), Rainer retrospectively addresses the use of repetition and seriality throughout her oeuvre up to that point and notes that, especially in her early work, she used repetition precisely to approach the objecthood status of sculpture and to create the necessary space in time to make dance visible:

In the early work I remember thinking that dance was at a disadvantage in relation to sculpture in that the spectator could spend as much time as he [sic] required to examine a sculpture, walk around it, etc., but a dance movement – because it happened in time – vanished as soon as it was executed. So in a solo called *The Bells*, I repeated the same seven movements for eight minutes. It was not exact repetition, as the sequence of movements kept changing. They also underwent changes through being repeated in different parts of the space and faced in different directions, in a sense allowing the spectator to “walk around it”. (1965/2017, p. 92)

Through the introduction of seriality in her dance, Rainer tried to achieve stasis in order to give the audience time to spend with the movements she executed and to let spectators take in the movements as they are, in their literalness instead of inscribed in a continuity or a teleological progression where they would serve in function of a signification beyond their sheer presence or literalism.

The first part of Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1974) shows a young woman (Akerman herself taking on the part of protagonist Julie) in a room which is almost entirely stripped of its furniture after the fourth shot (approximately four and a half minutes into the film). She engages in serialised variations of a limited number of movements and interactions with her bare surroundings. A first set of movements includes her lying on a mattress, placing the mattress in a different place, at a different angle to the camera, and lying on it again. A second sequence of movements shows her on the mattress, writing on a note pad, an action she keeps repeating throughout, in different places in the room, as the mattress keeps appearing in different places and at different angles. A third serialised action consists of her intermittently eating several spoonfuls of sugar out of a bag. The protagonist's face remains neutral, without any clearly interpretable expression throughout, and the repeated actions are all executed uniformly in a rather systematic, and not overly engaged, way, interspersed with moments of lethargy in which the figure remains in a single pose. The majority of shots are static long takes, shot perpendicular to the walls of the room in long shot. The absence of shot

distance variation, consistent use of duration and limited camera positions emphasise the stasis created by the behaviour of the protagonist, which is characterised by actions that are resumed over and over again in various recurring compositions; a distorted, non-progressing sense of time thus emerges.

It should be noted that the cinematographic and editing choices in this sequence illustrate deliberate limitations of the authorial possibilities to guide the spectators' gaze or instate a visual hierarchy. Akerman avoids close ups and medium shots, and the camera does not follow the protagonist through the space; the usual cinematic means to focus spectatorial attention on a single figure, object, or action are disregarded. Instead, the *mise-en-scène* appears as a stage on which the protagonist moves through a repetitive choreography. In her account of Akerman's Minimalist strategies, Margulies refers to the Warholian use of "the extended duration of a single image or event [to] forestall unidirectional apprehension" (1996, p. 51). In the first part of *Je tu il elle* (1974), the static quality generated by way of repetition, incited by deliberately limited cinematographical and choreographical repertoires, allows for the same effect. The cues Akerman takes from Rainer in this scene lead to a result that strongly resembles Rainer's description of intentionally spatialised time in *The Bells* (1961), which offers the spectator an experience analogous to the opportunity to scrutinise a sculpture – in their own time and from various angles.

Phenomenological Neutrality and Spectatorial Autonomy

It has so far become clear that stasis alters the perception of time by dismantling the spectatorial ability to perceive progression and that the implementation of stasis is occasionally – for example, in the work of Rainer – aimed at altering the conventional form of spectatorial engagement with the temporal artwork and creating a heightened visibility of the ephemeral. Before analysing the type of spectatorial engagement stasis generates in Akerman's cinema, it is useful to turn to Remes's interpretation of static cinema's effect on the spectator's experience. According to Remes, static cinema can evoke different types of spectatorial engagement dependent on the type of static cinema in question, varying from a focus on the material quality or surface of objects in brief, durational and static Fluxus films, which "encourag[e] a close meditative gaze" to "enabl[e] the spectator to see dimensions of everyday objects and experiences that are ordinarily invisible" (2015, p. 71), to a deliberately encouraged "form of distracted spectatorship" (p. 53) in the structural films of Andy Warhol, in which "time is malleable and dispersed; the work's temporal coordinates are molded and partitioned by the spectator"

(p. 143). The latter observation seems to be prefigured by Vivienne Dick's statement that in relation to Warhol's cinema "we have control over how we are seeing – we can let ourselves be absorbed into a meditative state or we can withdraw" (as cited in Remes, 2015, p. 41). As such, Remes seems to attribute a certain level of heightened autonomy to the spectator as a result of stasis. This resonates with Jonathan D. Kramer's description of the listener's experience of static or "vertical" music – a similarity that might point to the shared effect of stasis across temporal media:

Listening to a vertical musical composition can be like looking at a piece of sculpture. When we view the sculpture, we determine for ourselves the pacing of our experience: We are free to walk around the piece, view it from many angles, concentrate on some details, see other details in relationship to each other, step back and view the whole, contemplate the relationship between the piece and the space in which we see it, close our eyes and remember, leave the room when we wish, and return for further viewings [...] We are free to concentrate on details or on the whole. As with sculpture, the piece has no internal temporal differentiation to obstruct our perceiving it as we wish. (1988, p. 57)

Significantly, Kramer uses the analogy to sculpture to emphasise the autonomy of the listener in relation to static music along very similar lines to Rainer's recounting of her ambition to alter the spectatorial experience by means of repetition in *The Bells* (1961). The observer has to find their personal relation to the music piece and the absence of "internal temporal differentiation" (p. 57) guiding the listener's perception is interpreted as one that encourages their agency. Across temporal media, stasis is thus observed as an aesthetic phenomenon that bestows autonomy on the spectator or listener. It is likely that the frequency with which sculpture is evoked to describe the effect of stasis in dance and music points not so much to the medium specificity of sculpture but rather is symptomatic of the extent to which a static, endless temporality was shared across art disciplines in the Minimalist avant-garde. The criticism that subsequently addressed this temporality further illuminated the phenomenological orientation of Minimalism and the shift in the subject-object relationship it implies (Foster, 1996, p. 50). The latter two aspects can account for the freedom or agency of the spectator or listener that Rainer, Remes, and Kramer recognise in stasis and the emancipatory potential it has in Akerman's cinema.

Many Minimalist artists positioned their work as an attempt to offer a purely phenomenological experience (Foster, 1996, p. 43), an intervention that shifted the art experience from one primarily situated within the artwork and its intrinsic relations, to the entire situation within which

spectator and artwork are involved. The shift in the subject-object relationship is twofold, challenging both the conventional modernist roles of the artist (as expressionist or formalist critic) and the role of the spectator, who, in the words of Minimalist artist Robert Morris, is “more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from the various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context” (1966/1968, p. 232). Minimalism’s phenomenological orientation thus introduces a “contingency of perception”, thereby challenging “[modernism’s] idealist model of consciousness” (Foster, 1996, pp. 40, 42). This new Minimalist sensibility was addressed by a number of critics, including Rosalind Krauss, who attributed a positive valuation to this development as she regarded it as a desirable shift away from idealism and illusionism towards materialism (Foster, 1996, p. 42). Michael Fried’s seminal critique of Minimalist visual arts in “Art and Objecthood” (1967/1998) illustrates the opposite side of the critical spectrum. Among the first to denote Minimalism’s phenomenological character and subsequent shift of the subject-object relationship, Fried’s article addressed Minimalism’s “literalism” or self-posed “objecthood” (1967/1998, pp. 151–153), its introduction of duration or a type of “endlessness” in terms of experiential temporality (p. 166), and its consequential “theatricality” (pp. 153–154). According to Fried, Minimalist artists generated objects that were deliberately noncommunicational, drawing attention solely to their materiality and presence, thereby creating an experience characterised by “endlessness, or inexhaustibility, of being able to go on and on” as “the material itself confronts one in all its literalness, its ‘objectivity’, its absence of anything beyond itself” (p. 165). The core characteristics Fried identifies in Minimalist visual arts are present, and likely originated, in the coeval Minimalism in temporal media, as the “endless” experiential temporality is identical to the one generated by stasis.⁸ The temporality Fried describes in visual arts was analogous to the stasis sought by artists in temporal media such as La Monte Young in music and Rainer in dance, whose use of duration and repetition, respectively, similarly created a literalist emphasis on the surface level of their work. Fried’s apt diagnosis

8 Krauss has elaborated on Fried’s identification of theatricality in visual arts in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, correspondingly situating the origin of the “extended experience of time” characteristic of Minimalist sculpture in the performance and dance practices of the period (1977, p. 204). Some recent scholarship, such as that of Peter Shelley (2013) and Thomas Magna Hastings (2018) further investigates the connections between the Minimalist “endlessness” in visual arts and music, and Minimalist dance and performance, respectively.

of Minimalism's phenomenological orientation as constituted by its literalism and characteristic temporality illustrates the universality of a static quality across art disciplines in Minimalism and points towards the latter's profound impact on the spectatorial relation to the artwork.

Hal Foster offers an incisive genealogical perspective on Minimalism's phenomenological character and the various critical reactions it evoked; a central criticism was levelled against its naivety, as Minimalism posited "perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power" (1996, p. 43). This assumption uncovered its "historical and ideological limits", since the "critique of the subject" it initiated was only developed in "abstract terms" (p. 44). However, does the radically phenomenological orientation of Minimalism, tangible in its ascetic literalism and static temporality, not generate an ideological vacuum of sorts, which may subsequently allow every subject to introduce their own situatedness and personal history into their experience of the work? The subject-object shift addressed by Fried – in which, in the experience of the artwork, "the situation itself *belongs* to the beholder" (1967/1998, p. 154), includes "the beholder's *body*" (p. 155), and is in fact dependent on the beholder (pp. 163–164) – may have been solely posited on an abstract level, but in a sense what can be regarded as a naively phenomenological and, at a superficial glance, anti-ideological intervention, may in turn lend itself to an autonomisation of the subject that allows them to transcend both. Magdalena Ostas elaborates on the subject-object shift by delineating that Minimalist artworks

"address" us as ourselves, standing tied to the world by our usual psychological preoccupations, cognitive tasks, practical worries, sensuous reactions, emotional attachments, ethical cares, social affiliations, and personal idiosyncrasies [...] the kinds of engagement that anchor us to the ordinary world. (2018, p. 173)

I would argue that the way Akerman incorporates Minimalist conventions in her aesthetics, and specifically stasis, uses the phenomenological neutrality they generate to create a kind of openness to "personal idiosyncrasies" (Ostas, 2018, p. 173) in the spectatorial experience. Foster points out that

just as phenomenology undercuts the idealism of the Cartesian "I think", so minimalism undercuts the existentialism of the abstract expressionist "I express", but both substitute an "I perceive" that leaves meaning lodged in the subject. (1996, p. 43)

My hypothesis is that the idiosyncratic signifying potential, or “meaning lodged in the subject” (p. 43), is what Akerman’s cinema appears to allow space for in an anti-illusionist, anti-ideological gesture. In other words, the spectatorial freedom generated through the elimination of intentionality that Minimalism introduces might function in Akerman’s work not on a solely phenomenological level but as an emancipatory incentive that elevates the subject to a co-authorial position.

The compositional and choreographical stasis in *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and *Je tu il elle* (1974) eliminate teleology and narrative progression and refocus attention on literal materiality and compositional relations in a way very similar to the stasis in Minimalist works in other disciplines. The confrontation that Minimalist visual art poses to the beholder according to Fried, demanding attention without offering anything besides concrete presence in an infinite and nondirectional temporality, is thus reproduced in Akerman’s cinema. This confrontation with a concrete literalist presence has been discussed by Margulies with regard to *Je tu il elle* as well as to Akerman’s oeuvre in its entirety (see for example 1996, pp. 213, 6). Margulies emphasises the fundamental “materiality” that defines Akerman’s cinema despite its asceticism, indicating that “the quality of presence wavers precisely because of its materiality, because of the excess produced in it by hyperbole and redundance” (p. 20). The proliferation of images captured and recaptured from different angles and sequences of similar shots, generating a stagnated temporality, constitute a confrontation that is simultaneously engaging and open-ended. I would argue that Akerman’s static cinema does not produce a distracted spectatorship like the one discerned by Remes, but rather demands that the spectator take on the role of Carlo Ginzburg’s reader-hunter (1986/1989), be it precisely in her work’s refusal to provide guidance in the form of teleological progression or visual hierarchy. Instead of exerting authorial control, Akerman’s cinema drowns the spectator in an endless “literalist-descriptive” nominalism due to her “relentless cataloguing of the gestures and shots possible within a restricted grid” (Margulies, 1997, pp. 97, 117). As such, Akerman’s minimisation of elements (in *mise-en-scène*) and possibilities (in terms of cinematography and editing) is deployed to procure an exhaustive representation or documentation of these limited elements; the compositional stasis of *Hotel Monterey* floods the spectator with excessive images of the same, as the first scene of *Je tu il elle* does on a choreographical level – a film in which this excessive nominalism is echoed by the voiceover.

The tendency to show everything – either in real time, more than once or, preferably, both – forces the spectator to navigate the images autonomously, leaving space for multiple spectatorial intentionalities or

co-authored versions. In this sense, the stasis of Akerman's cinema alternately offers a phenomenological and interpretative incentive, not unlike the eternal ambivalence of a rabbit-duck illusion: her cinema's orchestrated simultaneity or non-hierarchy, created through a radical stagnation of time, allows the spectator the opportunity to experientially shift from one mode to the other. Recalling visual artist Frank Stella's statement on the phenomenological nature of his work, "what you see is what you see" (Glaser, 1966/1968, p. 158), Akerman's cinema simultaneously seems to adhere to this literalist sensibility and break its hermeticism into infinite interpretative potentialities. Akerman's use of stasis incentivises the spectator to alternately approach images from a phenomenologically literalist perspective and idiosyncratically fill in the blanks through autonomous signifying processes, precisely because of the work's nonprogressive endlessness.

This phenomenological orientation and the anti-ideological openness it results in constitute the inherent political potential of stasis as a Minimalist aesthetic strategy across temporal media – a potential Akerman actively taps into. From this perspective, stasis would then not necessarily have political operability in every artwork that contains it but can take on this property depending on the work in question, by way of the phenomenological shift in the subject-object relationship it evokes. In this sense, an elective affinity between Minimalist stasis and political art can be discerned, which arises due to the former's inherently phenomenological orientation that reduces authorial intentionality, thus facilitating the rapprochement between a static and a political quality in some artworks through the increase of spectatorial autonomy and the negatively liberating incentive to self-position. This could explain the frequent discussion of temporality in Akerman's work from a feminist or otherwise political perspective, as well as Walsh's observation of the uptake of duration by political post-1968 European cinema. The observational, phenomenological and objectifying strategies of structural film such as stasis – which, as indicated, includes a particular use of duration – thus might have gained prominence in second wave European political durational cinema specifically because of its anti-ideological, ascetic nature aimed at the elimination of teleology and authorial control.

What has remained unaddressed throughout this discussion of Minimalist legacies in Akerman's films are of course the numerous parallels that could be drawn to developments and subsequent critical observations in Europe during and preceding the same time frame. Firstly, the above delineation of increased spectator autonomy by means of stasis in cinema resonates with Bazin's praise of long takes and deep focus as a means to activate spectators to navigate visual information

without elaborate authorial guidance in terms of cinematography or editing (1948/2005, p. 28) – praise related to his commendation of Neorealism’s “phenomenology” (1953/2005, p. 65).⁹ Furthermore, the broad quest for objectivity and elimination of authorial expressivity and intentionality in which Minimalism should be situated, naturally far exceeds and precedes the art movement in itself, and finds equal representation in Serial music, the death of the author and literary movements seeking literalist objectivity like the Nouveau Roman. This brief digression serves to account for the fact that, given Akerman’s position between the European and American Minimalist avant-gardes, it could be argued that neither her discussed aesthetic strategies, nor their supposed emancipatory operability necessarily originate *solely* in her engagement with Minimalism and the structural film it propagated. Alternatively, the ease with which Akerman incorporated paradigmatically Minimalist aesthetic strategies in her corpus alongside the cues she took from Nouvelle Vague directors could be regarded as an indication of the prevalence of proximate aesthetic developments on both sides of the Atlantic in the decades running up to her directorial career, generated by the shared quest for objectivity which underpinned artistic traditions in Western Europe and the United States.

Focusing specifically on the Minimalist legacy in Akerman’s work, as opposed to her position between the two avant-gardes and their underlying similarities, allows us to bring otherwise overlooked aspects of her cinema into view. Supported by the many critical accounts that indicate the impact Minimalist conventions – particularly with regard to temporality – had on Akerman’s oeuvre, it is reasonable to state that stasis was a key part of her repertoire of aesthetic strategies. Delineating the Minimalist legacy in Akerman’s cinema may allow us to discern subtle discrepancies between her aesthetics and those of European avant-garde filmmakers, with which it may share surface similarities that in fact developed from different origins. Pursuing this perspective may, for example, further illuminate how her incorporation of Minimalist choreographical conventions informed her acting style, leading to an anti-illusionist anti-naturalism that distinguishes itself from proximate anti-psychological forms of figure behaviour due to its incorporation of Minimalist stasis. The genealogical tracing of particular aesthetic strategies and their effects across artforms may furthermore offer incisive expansions and revisions of histories of cinema, such as the ones offered by Walsh and Remes.

⁹ It should be noted in this respect that Margulies’s monograph (1996) discusses Bazin’s position on duration in cinema in relation to the work of Akerman and Warhol.

Finally, an inquiry into the relation between stasis and political operationality in Akerman's later work, including her documentaries, may illuminate whether this Minimalist legacy contributes to the ethical quality frequently attributed to her cinema – hypotheses which would all require further research into the intricate genealogical diversity at the heart of Akerman's aesthetics.

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