

Abigail Hendrix

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The Stuff of Landscape Itself

In his 2021 thesis “Landscape’s Emergence Through Film,” Professor Richard Evans argues that landscape “emerges, firstly, through the camera and its operator’s interactions with the objects they encounter and record at the time” (4). In Evans’ view, the filmmaker’s relationship to landscape is more than that of a collector; by depicting landscape, filmmakers are engaging with the materiality of both place and film and positioning themselves as the subjective manipulator of both. Taking experimental filmmakers Chantal Akerman, Gunvor Nelson, and Lynne Sachs as examples, it becomes clear that portrayal of landscape can show more about the filmmakers’ subjectivity than any inherent “truth” captured by the camera. Through their depictions of spaces and landscapes, these three filmmakers do not attempt to portray objective reality; rather, they use place as way to draw their audience through an external landscape and into a more meaningful and resonate internal place.

In their 2011 essay titled “The Dirt on Feminist Landscapes,” Tisch performance PhD candidates Katherine Brewer Ball and Julia Steinmetz explore the depiction of landscape in queer feminist art circles, including performance art. They argue that landscape “is always about the perspective of the individual looking at, and knowing the trees, hills, and people around her,” making “the experience of landscape” a performance in itself (3). Their observation is a critique of traditional landscape art that places the female figure as one object among many in an external setting. Ball and Steinmetz argue that “media depictions shape popular understandings of the social, economic and gendered configuration of landscapes” (5). In fact, Akerman, Nelson, and

Sachs are, in their films, pushing the depiction of landscape beyond mere setting or backdrop long before 2011. They are producing their own social and physical construction of landscape through the camera, engaging with their roles as women and filmmakers in a media space.

Born in Brussels in 1950, Chantal Akerman is a filmmaker whose subjectivity has always been embedded in the environments she depicts. In many of her films, Akerman employs the long, wide, steady shot seen in early ethnographic cinema. Rather than capture any facts about her subject, however, film professor Ivone Margulies argues that Akerman's long shots are "the cinematic transformer for a to-and-fro passage between abstraction and figuration" (3).

Akerman's shots, which extend past an audience's expectation and comfort, make an image seem surreal and unfamiliar, rather than a display of ontological truth. Margulies argues that Akerman's "hyperrealism" is an "alienating force" in her work (7). Similar to repeating a familiar word until it feels foreign, Akerman's long, wide shots divorce the familiar from spectator's expectations. This technique is particularly common in Akerman's depiction of landscape and interior space.

In her deeply personal film *News from Home*, Akerman depicts her relationship to the landscape of New York City with these long, uninterrupted shots. In this film, long shots of the city are accompanied by a voiceover reading letters from Akerman's mother, carrying throughout themes of attachment, detachment, homesickness, loneliness, and love—both between Akerman and mother, and Akerman and New York. While Akerman herself does not operate the camera, her presence as filmmaker is palpable throughout, not merely through the letters but through her depiction of place. Despite her lack of physical intervention, the images are not a voyeuristic portrayal of New York from an outsider, but rather a portrait of Akerman at a specific point in life through her imagery of the city. The camera and film, although invisible,

become part of the landscape. Central to this film is the idea of “liminality”—the threshold between childhood and adulthood, attachment and detachment, home and a foreign space. This concept is reflected in the film: the images are often shot in transitional moments of light such as twilight or sunset, or in liminal spaces such as a subway car. The camera often points toward New Yorkers on their way to and from places. This imagery evokes Akerman’s own sense of displacement. Margulies argues that many of Akerman’s subjects and characters have a “non-fixed identity, their contact with or friction against spaces or other performers creating transformative dissonances” (18). While *News from Home* has no “protagonist” depicted on film, Akerman herself becomes a character who embodies this friction not through visible interaction with space, but through the depiction of space itself.

Akerman also privileges depiction of space in her less personal works and does not attempt to hide her presence as filmmaker. In *Sud*, a documentary about the violent murder of a Black man in Jasper, Texas, Akerman breaks with traditional documentary form. She uses the landscape of the town, rather than just the traditional talking-head interview, to portray the community’s feelings toward the murder, and imbues these images with her own reactions. In one shot, for example, Akerman lingers for a full minute on a dense forest from the back of a moving truck, using naturalistic sounds of birds and insects. Part way through the shot, the audio and visuals cease to be in sync, causing a disruption for the audience. In that moment, this beautiful landscape is transformed into something more eerie, bringing forward the themes of the film through landscape alone. In his detailed analysis of the film, professor Nikolaj Lübecker notes that in *Sud* “what is usually in the background (environment, landscape, setting) moves into the foreground” (45). Rather than highlighting the physical presence of the Black Jasper residents affected by the crime, Akerman instead casts Jasper itself as a character, accompanied

by the voices of the residents who are grappling with the trauma of this man's death. As Lübecker argues, "the humans, who are present in the images because they inhabit these spaces ... are not privileged by Akerman's camera" (45). As in *News from Home*, the duration aesthetic is vital in "making the absences weigh on the spectator" (48). Although Akerman is not present in the film in either the visuals or the soundtrack, Lübecker notes that she "brings her own experience to this environment" and makes it clear that "Akerman is appalled and saddened by the crime she is filming" (46). As Lübecker notes, her "landscapes have been phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and/or inspired by trauma theory" (51). The landscape of Jasper is inextricably tied to the murder that occurred in the same way its residents are. In fact, it is another way they are all tied together.

In an essay titled "Between Home and Flight," Professor Irene Valle Corpas quotes Akerman: "I'll put the camera there, in front, as long as is necessary and the truth will appear" (4). This "truth," however, is not composed simply of the images captured by the camera. Akerman's truth is the subjective relationship between herself and the image, and between the audience and the image, one that emerges during a long, unmanipulated shot. Corpas argues that Akerman seeks to "shake the spectator, to make the viewer feel the passing of time, warning that one's own feeling and experience are both socially constructed and malleable" (14). In both the diaristic *News from Home* and the documentarian *Sud*, Akerman uses a durational aesthetic not as an objective tool, but as a call for both herself and the audience to engage with landscape in a critical, subjective way.

A generation ahead of Akerman, Gunvor Nelson, who was born in 1931 in Kirstinehamn, Sweden, was making embodied, place-oriented experimental films in the 1960s, working in both her home country and the United States. In her work, Nelson engages with themes of

displacement, nationality, aging, death, and memory, focusing on the materiality of film (and later video). In her chapter on Nelson in *Women's Experimental Cinema*, Professor Chris Sundholm writes that Nelson's films are "intensely personal and at the same time abstract" (68). Trained as a painter, Nelson is known for painting on her film, creating and animating collages, and for her precise editing techniques, rendering familiar images abstract. Although this manipulation of the medium stands in contrast to Akerman's aesthetic, Nelson, too, uses the camera and filmmaking as a tool for subjective representation, rather than an apparently impartial capturing of reality or truth.

One such use of this representation is a very personal engagement with recognizable space in Nelson's 1987 film *Light Years*. Set in her native Sweden, *Light Years* is Nelson's exploration of aging, decay, and national identity through the depiction of spaces that are at once universal and yet very Swedish. The film has three distinct aesthetic themes: Swedish landscape, in both steady and moving shots; fruit in various stages of decay; and live painting and collage animation of a house. Each thematic section, interacting and repeating throughout the film, is nearly devoid of human figures: in one scene we glimpse a woman and her dogs in a rural area; in another we see Nelson's finger squishing a worm. Despite the absence of human figures, however, the film is not lacking in humanity—quite the opposite. Each image becomes a doorway into Nelson's own subjective interpretation of the image. A moving car or a rotting fruit evoke time passing. Native Swedish scenery and the ever-moving, ever-changing house call to mind identity and belonging. And within this framework, there is room for the spectator to inscribe upon the images their own subjectivity, their own emotional reaction. In his essay "A Cinema of Presence and Proximity," film professor John Sundholm takes a semiotic look at Nelson's work, analyzing the relationship between the filmic or electronic signal of her work and

what it signifies. Sundholm argues that Nelson uses the camera as a “registering, representing machine” (6); her work frees film and video from “the idea of the frame as constituting a necessary window out to the world” (8). For Nelson, the camera is not a tool to capture. Rather, it is a tool to search for meaning through representation. Her work, rather than providing a “window out to the world” funnels the external imagery through her internal perception.

Red Shift is a similarly personal exploration of identity, but rather than focusing on exterior landscape, Nelson frames this exploration through the interior setting of the home. Three generations—grandmother, mother, and daughter—are situated in this domestic space, and the long shots and close ups are equally steeped in Nelson’s thematic exploration. The close ups (a wrinkled hand, a piece of fabric, a glass) juxtaposed with long shots (a doorway, an empty room, a window) merge past and present in a cross-generational exploration. A long shot of a room, for example, is not a study of this family’s physical space, but a study of their relationships. In an interview with professor and editor of *Framework Magazine* Drake Stutesman, Nelson says, “I listed things like ‘anger,’ ‘jealousy,’ and ‘love,’ all kinds of emotions. I wanted those in there somehow, but how they were going to be depicted, I didn’t spell out in the beginning” (139). Nelson set out to convey an emotional truth that cannot be seen with the eye. Instead, she needed the camera to provide an apparatus through which these emotions could be both evoked and understood. In John Sundholm’s essay “The Material and Mimetic,” he refers to Nelson’s films as an example of the *mimetic*: “that which can never be conceptualized or clearly articulated. Yet it can be captured” (168). He writes that nothing in Nelson’s work is “given a simple identity or meaning” (170), nor is she looking to “imprint a vision or worldview” on a person or place (169). *Red Shift*, like *Light Years*, is a depiction of Nelson’s feelings about the images on screen, a depiction that leaves room for her audience consider their own.

As professor Chris Holmlund writes, Nelson's work is a constant "burying and unearthing of meanings, messages, forms, and relations" (158). Nelson points her camera at a subject (such as a landscape), sometimes with an emotional starting place as with *Red Shift* and sometimes not, and the subject is changed. Nelson's work and words illustrate that the camera is not a tool of objectivity or realism, but a tool for transformation. And, in the process, the film itself is transformed into a landscape. As Nelson tells Stutesman, "I guess I want to investigate the world and use whatever I can to get into it" (147). While her engagement with and manipulation of the medium is in contrast with Akerman's durational aesthetic, Nelson's filmic investigations into place seek to capture truth about herself as filmmaker and unearth truth about the spectators.

Trained as a historian and studio artist, filmmaker and poet Lynne Sachs has continued this tradition of embodied and place-focused essay films, documentaries, and performances that are both socially engaged and very personal. Like Akerman and Nelson (a teacher of Sachs'), depiction of space plays a vital role in Sachs' exploration. In an interview with anthropologist-filmmaker (and then-student) Kathryn Ramey, Sachs states that with filmmaking "you could go to new places and new planets and new countries and observe and synthesize and be political, in a way, but also bring to it a sort of gentleness, a poetry, a fascination with the way things move through space, all at the same time" (16). For Sachs, the camera, rather than a tool of "taking," is a tool of exploration and discovery.

In her diarist documentary *Which Way is East*, Sachs explores the post-war relationship between the United States and Vietnam. While Sachs and her sister are very present in the film through the voiceover reading of their journals, the imagery in the film sticks to the seemingly objective landscape of Vietnam—its streets, markets, restaurants, homes, and sometimes local

inhabitants. Sometimes the scenery passes by from a car window as Sachs drives across the country; sometimes the imagery comes through her window as she lies in bed ill. Occasionally the camera points toward her and her sister's Vietnamese friends as they explore Ho Chi Min or Hanoi, their voices only occasionally audible in the soundtrack. Although Sachs does not intervene directly in most of the shots in *Which Way is East*, the images of landscape and place function as a vehicle for both Sachs sisters to grapple with their identities as Americans in a country once terrorized by U.S. imperialist power.

In an essay in *Millennium Film Journal* titled "I Am Not a War Photographer," Sachs writes that with these projects she "had to search for a visual approach to looking at trauma and conflict," one that uses "abstract and reality-based imagery" to work with these difficult themes (41). Despite this aesthetic of "collection," however, Sachs resists the exoticification of the "other" and replaces it with a curiosity and compassion that is wholly Sachs'. As Sachs tells *The Brooklyn Rail* in a 2013 interview, "one of the keys to working in reality and working with people is allowing the extraordinary to appear familiar rather than exotic." While Sachs may work in cultures and landscapes that are not her own, her camera is not there to capture and conquer the exotic. Rather, Sachs uses the camera to bridge the cultural gap between herself as subjective filmmaker and her real, human subjects and collaborators.

This relationship between camera and environment is present in Sachs' other works, including those that take place closer to home. In her short 16mm film *A Trip to Bernadette Mayer's Childhood Home* (2020), Sachs again uses simple shots to explore complex emotional ideas, the bulk of which are presented through her voiceover track. In this film, she reads from Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* while the camera wanders through Mayer's childhood neighborhood of Ridgewood, Queens. Made to commemorate Mayer's personal documentation

project of shooting a roll of 35mm film and keeping a journal daily, this film becomes Sachs' own diary entry. The embodied camera bounces through the space as though walking, looks down at the ground, up at the sky, toward the doorways of brownstone apartments, down the sidewalk at foot level, sometimes shaking and moving so quickly the images are indiscernible. It is fully immersed in the environment. Occasionally the positive black-and-white image flickers to negative, for a brief moment turning the recognizable image alien and dreamlike. Underneath, Sachs' voice reiterates Mayer's words on memory and place, underscoring the conversation between camera and subject. "By the window, a subject frames, see?" Again, despite the simple, unmanipulated images of place, each image is positioned within Sachs' internal landscape—her admiration for Mayer, her love for the neighborhood, and her personal practice as a diarist. The film is not an ontological study of either Ridgewood or Mayer; rather, it is a dialogue between Sachs and this space that inspires her.

Like Nelson and Akerman, Sachs uses landscape or place as a doorway into her personal subjectivity as artist and filmmaker. As Sachs tells *The Brooklyn Rail*, when one enters a community (as a filmmaker and human), "You feed your eyes. You feed your mouth." Sachs films are an opportunity for Sachs to share in community, her camera a tool for collaboration rather than a way to "take images." Through her works, from a feature length documentary to a three-minute experimental film or a poem, Sachs reveals to her audience the personal insights imbued in a place or landscape, and leaves space for the audience to add their own.

Evans argues that the word landscape encompasses "the interactions that happen between environments' constitutive entities," including "humans' interactions with any landscape entity" (39). By this definition, one cannot separate the filmmaker and the landscape, or even the film material and landscape. In depicting landscape, filmmakers also depict their own subjective

relationship to place and objects, including the camera itself. These depictions of landscape, then, become a threshold into both the physical and social worlds of the filmmaker and their subject. As Evans argues, “landscape emerges through film, not because of film’s reanimation of past events, but because it itself is landscape, is made from the stuff of landscape itself” (3). There is a powerful relationship between film and landscape, whether a film is rendering a recognizable place abstract, or an exotic place familiar. As Ball and Steinmetz argue, “landscape becomes a way to describe one’s perspective-based experience of space, place, movement and stasis” (6). Through the inherent relationship between the materiality of place and the materiality of film and filmmaker, Chantal Akerman, Gunvor Nelson, and Lynne Sachs use filmmaking to grapple with their own corporeal role in relationship to film and landscape, and their social role as filmmakers engaging with people and place.

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