Landscape Memories: Akerman's *Sud* and the "Spectator-Environment"

> *I wanted to . . . see if the landscape could remember something other than its own beauty.*
>
> Chantal Akerman (20)

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, more and more scholars in the humanities and the social sciences have been concerned with rethinking human-world relations in the light of the escalating climate crisis and rapid developments in (bio-)technological sciences. One result of these diverse efforts has been the development of so-called non-anthropocentric ontologies. These emerge from scholars associated with animal studies, ecocriticism, affect theory, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, technocultural studies and many other recent – and sometimes irreconcilable – theoretical orientations (see Grusin). Given the heterogeneous nature of these theoretical formations, it is unsurprising that they have met with very different responses. However, one common objection has been political. Critics in more Hegelian and Marxist traditions have argued that such approaches are impotent or even counterproductive when it comes to dealing not only with the climate crisis the anti-anthropocentric writers set out to address (eg. Žižek *DLC*, Žižek *AR*; Johnston) but also, more generally, with the escalating problems of oppression and inequality found in the socio-political sphere (eg. Barnett; Rekret 'A Critique of New Materialism', 'The Head, The Hand, and Matter'). Key in many of these political debates about non-anthropocentric theory is the question of agency: How can we conceptualize political agency if we no longer maintain a strong distinction between human

beings and their environments, if we insist instead on being entangled in matter? What happens to the idea of political critique if we have no (or only little) distance from the world that we are speaking about?

This article considers selected aspects of this relation between politics and non-anthropocentric ontology through the analysis of one the films in Chantal Akerman's place tetralogy: the relatively under-studied 1999 documentary *Sud* (*South*).[i] On the one hand, this film explores the questions of power and social injustice which dominate more classic sociological discourses; on the other, it directs our attention to the affective and ecological dimensions of existence. The first dimension may initially be associated with the many interview sequences included in the film, and the second dimension with the numerous environmental shots, but the force of Akerman's film lies with how it gradually brings these dimensions together. In the following I therefore argue that the specificity of *Sud* results from the way in which it relies on an affective-ecological conception of the human subject to deliver a particularly poignant socio-political analysis of – and engagement with – racial politics in the American South. Rather than maintaining a distinction between socio-political analysis on the one hand, and affective and ecological analysis on the other, *Sud* demonstrates not only how these epistemologies can combine, but how the ecological and the affective can develop and enhance a political critique.

In order to establish this argument, the article begins with a consideration of some of the more obviously socio-political aspects of Akerman's film. This reading will itself be twofold: it will focus first on what Robert Koehler has called *Sud*'s "moments of pure journalism" (20) before turning to the political implications of Akerman's avant-garde aesthetics. The second half of the article then outlines an affective-ecological reading. Drawing on the work of Gilbert Simondon, this part seeks to determine the ontology drawn

up by Akerman's film, the kind of spectatorial position that accompanies this ontology, and the socio-political implications of this spectatorial position. Finally, I shall bring the argument of the article together in a conclusion about how Akerman tells political stories.

1. Avant-Garde Journalism

Sud documents a horrific racial crime that took place in Jasper, Texas in 1998, when three white supremacists brutally murdered a black man by the name of James Byrd Jr.. Akerman, who had planned a film about the American South for some time, arrived in Jasper shortly before the memorial service for Byrd and was invited to attend. She shot the first material for the film at the memorial, and this footage constitutes the fourteen-minute-long centerpiece of the film. Aesthetically, this section stands out for its low sound and image resolution and rawer appearance than the rest of the film. Preceding and following the memorial, we find two different kinds of footage: interviews with the black and white inhabitants of Jaspers (and Texas more generally) – a sheriff, a journalist, and a former FBI agent specializing in white supremacy; and numerous long takes of Jasper and its rural surroundings, seen either in fixed-frame shots, or from the passenger seat of a car gliding through the town and landscapes. Amongst these environmental shots, two scenes deserve special mention. Shot from the back of a pickup truck, they focus on the road along which Byrd's body was dragged. Akerman shows part of this journey when the circumstances of the murder are presented, eighteen minutes into the film. We learn that Byrd was beaten up, tied to a car and dragged along the road for more than three miles. During this journey his life slipped away, he lost his limbs, and what remained of him was left in front of a cemetery. Akerman then finishes her film with "arguably the most inspired moment in all of Akerman" (Koehler 20): a seven-minute-long take in which the camera travels along the

road, showing the rest of the extended crime scene. Occasionally, we see markings on the tarmac, and we know that these are the places where body parts were found.

As mentioned, *Sud* contains elements of journalism (this label, "journalism", should not be understood as normative here). There is no voice-over narration, so the investigative dimension is due primarily to the interviews. One of these is with a local journalist. He impassively narrates the facts of the murder until he reaches the dismemberment of the body, at which point his body reacts – almost independently – like that of Anwar Congo in Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) or that of Robert Durst in Andrew Jarecki's *The Jinx* (2015): his eyes twitch and his stomach belches. Other interviewees present the history of the community. An elderly woman recounts how her brother was almost killed by the Ku Klux Klan, and a man relates how Nat King Cole was beaten up by white people before a concert in Birmingham, Alabama and still went on stage. We also see the sheriff sitting behind his desk, downplaying racial problems. Some of these sequences are stylized, but much of this footage would not be out of place in a BBC documentary.

This material therefore also allows for a socio-political analysis of the murder of James Byrd Jr.. Let us note three dimensions such an analysis could include. First, we are invited to consider the role that the church can be made to play in the American South. The specialist on white supremacists explains that racist organizations often operate by infiltrating churches. Church councils are small, so it is simple to take over a church by placing just a few (racist) men and women on a board of governance. As a result, most congregations are now either exclusively white or exclusively African-American. This analysis can be expanded if we consider an interview that Akerman gave to Scott MacDonald in 2002. Here, she notes that although black Christian churches undoubtedly

used to play an important role in the organization of the struggle against oppression, she now believes that they often let down their communities by preaching the values of forgiveness and turning the other cheek (MacDonald 266–67). In an interview with Frédéric Bas, she is even more direct:

> Many of the black people I encountered deny that there are still problems. I had a long, instructive conversation with a priest who told me "today, it's all right". There is a denial of this problem. Obviously, the situation is not what it was in the 1960s, but fundamentally things have changed very little. (qtd. in Bas, my translation)

Akerman also remarks that only one black man in her film expressed anger at the horrendous murder – and he was a Muslim (MacDonald 266). This last point – that the anger was expressed by a Muslim man – does not come across in the film. We do not know this particular interviewee's faith; Akerman clearly does not want to push to the fore a difference between various religious communities. However, the footage from the memorial service unambiguously points to the problematic role that religion can play. Here, we are in the company of an all-black congregation: James Byrd Jr.'s family and friends are present, one of his sisters addresses the community and a friend sings Byrd's favorite song. At the beginning of the scene, two ministers are speaking. They not only praise the Byrd family for their refusal to be dragged into a poisonous racial debate, but go so far as to construe the murder as a fresh departure for the community as a whole, a chance to bring people of all races together. Regardless of how well-intentioned this conciliatory optimism may be, this narrative about fresh departures is difficult to accept – not least as it is spoken to the faces of the grieving family. The spectator is therefore

relieved when sister and friend take over, speaking and singing in honor of James Byrd Jr.. It may be wrong to say that *Sud* is an indictment of religion, but it is definitely a film that shows how religion can be made to stand in the way of progress.

A second (intersecting) socio-political thread can be found in the interview with the local sheriff. He is wearing his uniform, a sheriff's star and a cowboy hat; he sits with folded hands resting on his desk, behind a rustic wooden name badge: "Billy Rowles, the State of Texas, Jasper County Sheriff". In one corner of his office, there is a large Stars and Stripes, in the other an equally large Lone Star flag. Physically, Billy Rowles resembles the then Governor of Texas, George W. Bush, but more important is the discourse to which I alluded above: Rowles explains that there is no racism in Jasper, there are only socio-economic problems. He argues that little distinguishes Jasper from most other places in the country, and that it might, in fact, be a better place than most because black and white people live close together, play sports together, and so forth. No scene in the film gives credence to this claim, and Akerman explicitly contradicts it in the interviews with Bas and MacDonald. In this manner, the sheriff uses socio-economic problems as an excuse for *not* dealing with racism, and in doing so also absolves himself of any responsibility, emphasizing instead that the problems must be solved at the national level. It is obviously important to find solutions at the national level, but the unwillingness to deal with specifically racial problems is nevertheless disturbing – not least if we again recall that this analysis is put forth in the context of the lynching of James Byrd Jr..

Other aspects of Akerman's film add further layers to the analysis of racism in Jasper and the South. For example, we see the poor neighborhoods where black people live, and we see black prisoners in striped prison uniforms carrying out community service under the surveillance of a white mounted guard. In one of the most stylized interview sequences,

the Muslim man (whom we do not know to be a Muslim) protests against injustice. The man is wearing a tuxedo, which links him to the story about how the beaten Nat King Cole (presumably in a tuxedo) performed for the black community in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1950s. Nat King Cole's resistance and dignity not only reflect back onto the tuxedo-clad interviewee, inscribing his anger within a long tradition and endowing it with nobility, the link between music and resistance also points to the song performance at the memorial service (and to an early scene with a black guitarist). The suggestion is that a contestatory politics, anchored in pain, might also be expressed through music.

The potentially pacifying nature of religion, the irresponsibility of white authorities, and the nobility of black struggle as it is expressed in music are three dimensions that could form part of a socio-political analysis of *Sud*. However, an exclusive emphasis on such elements might suggest that Akerman's film offers a recognizable form of investigative journalism that could belong on most terrestrial TV stations. That is not true. Akerman is careful to distinguish herself from this genre:

> At the heart of this journey is the murder of James Byrd Jr., and his presence haunts the entire film. This is not an anatomy of his murder, nor the autopsy of a black man lynched by three young white males, but more an evocation of how this event fits into a landscape and climate as much mental as physical. (qtd. in Sultan 21)

To make clear how quickly and radically *Sud* differs from the "anatomy of a murder" template, it suffices to offer a brief description of the film's opening minutes.

Akerman begins with a low-angle shot of a local church. In the left middle-ground, a black man uses a string trimmer to cut around the big stones that fence off a lawn, and in

the left foreground there is a sign with the name of the church and its minister: “The Greater First Baptist Church, Lisman Al”. Right of center, towards the background of the image, we see the redbrick church with its small white spire, set against the clear blue sky. The rest of the image is dominated by the freshly trimmed lawn. The scene is bathed in sunshine, the soundtrack mixes machine noise from the string trimmer with the occasional sounds of passing cars and the steady chirping of crickets that accompany so many scenes throughout the film (including the opening credits). The movements of the gardener are slow: it is a hot day. The low-angle shot, the careful framing and the fact that the camera never moves close to the gardener link this opening shot to a self-conscious avant-garde tradition. But first and foremost, this avant-garde dimension results from the duration of this fixed-frame shot: the camera rolls for a full minute with very little action displayed in the image.

Fig. 1: Chantal Akerman, first scene, *Sud* (1999)

This opening scene is followed by another static long take: a black man is sitting on a bench in front of a ramshackle house, playing with a water bottle (again we remain at a distance). The scene reflects back onto the opening shot: the contrast between the immaculate church and the dilapidated house is telling. There follows a third, static take of two black men in green and white prison uniforms, tidying up the communal flower beds in the city. The fourth and fifth shots are also "uneventful" fixed-frame durational shots, and in scene six we have the first – very slow – drive through the city and its surroundings: a sixty-second take travels through the poorer suburbs of Jasper. All of these scenes concentrate on places, as does the film's title. The humans, who are all African-Americans, are present in the images because they inhabit these spaces, but they are not privileged by Akerman's camera.[ii] These are warm days in Texas, life is slow, and the film responds by bringing its spectator into the heat and slow rhythm. We have to wait until the film's eighth scene – seven minutes into the seventy-one-minute running time – before any speech is heard. Throughout the film, all questions are edited out, so it falls to an elderly black woman surrounded by her grandchildren to give the film's (already now debatable) first line: "It has changed a whole lot since my time…".

It should thus be clear that *Sud* is a highly stylized film. What is usually in the background (environments, landscapes, settings) moves into the foreground, and for the first seventeen minutes of the film there is no mention of James Byrd Jr. at all. Logical filmic parallels take us to the work of directors such as James Benning, and to the North American avant-garde tradition of Andy Warhol, Michael Snow and Jonas Mekas, which shaped both Benning and Akerman (see Margulies; MacDonald; Dieutre 211). It is possible to consider the film's avant-garde elements in two different but interconnected ways. First, we will

consider the political dimensions of the emphasis on landscapes and duration, then we shall turn to the question of the spectatorial subject and its ontology.

Among the political dimensions, we find the dialogue with existing filmic traditions. It can be said that Akerman responds to sensationalist takes on violent stories like that of Byrd by turning down the tempo, thereby creating a very particular viewing experience. Her preference for long takes, mid-range shots, landscapes and silence creates a cinema of suspension. In the vast critical literature on slow cinema (in which Akerman often features), there has been a tendency to frame such suspensions in opposition to Hollywood conventions. This is a simplification (see Beckman), but it is a tempting and not entirely misleading one. It is obvious that *Sud* challenges the conventions of cause-effect narratives, continuity editing, shot-countershot compositions, and suturing, among others. And it is equally obvious that *Sud* offers an unworking of the conventions that dominate many true crime documentaries and TV shows. As Staci Stutsman has argued,[iii] these shows tend to borrow from literary melodramas in their attempt to offer the spectator what Peter Brooks called a world that is "morally legible" (42). Tanya Horeck has emphasized that the popularity of true crime TV series also results from the manner in which they turn spectators into investigators, ultimately satisfying our desire for truth. Akerman's film is radically different from this kind of murder-entertainment: it shows neither the victim nor the perpetrators, thereby de-psychologizing the analysis of the murder. It disturbs our desire to establish causal relations, challenges the idea of a morally legible world, and queries what can be meant by truth. It is therefore appropriate to emphasize the oppositional dimensions of Akerman's film: *Sud* opposes an entertainment system that encourages us to place a human being within a violent binary framework (guilty/not guilty) – a system that seduces us by inviting us to occupy the position of the judge. Leaving

this framework behind, Akerman notes: "In a documentary, taking sides doesn't interest me, but the matter is to let something express itself in all its complexity, something that should find an echo with what is most often hidden in the other, the spectator" (qtd. in Sultan 27).

This does not mean that there should be no judgement. *Sud* remains a film about racial conflict and crimes; it may suspend the spectator's desire for judgement, but we never doubt that Akerman is appalled and saddened by the crime she is filming. Rather, the decision to block a move from crime to judgement (and then on to other issues), must itself be understood as an intervention of a political nature: it allows us to think more carefully about the complex relations between social violence and political action. Akerman's suspension demands courage in a situation where the pressure to reach a swift conclusion is intense.

When considering the politics of Akerman's *Sud*, we must therefore hold together two different dimensions. On the one hand, *Sud* has a journalistic – engaged – dimension. It is not only possible, but necessary, to offer a socio-political reading of the film. On the other hand, this avant-garde film unhinges the well-oiled discursive mechanisms that link conflicts, crimes, truths, and judgements. The film will frustrate some spectators, but it offers the possibility to think critically both about the injustices we encounter in the film, and about the frameworks we usually apply when thinking about such injustices. Indeed, after watching *Sud* one may begin to worry about the violence of the discursive frameworks dominating most true crime films and TV series, and one may respond skeptically to the enticing invitation to occupy a position as judge.

However, this combination of journalism and avant-garde elements is not all there is to Akerman's film. The avant-garde elements are political and critical, but they also point to

a different ontology and a different conceptualization of subjectivity. An overemphasis on the opposition to narrative cinema and conventional forms of investigative documentary comes with the risk of overlooking what happens during the moments of what is sometimes called "empty cinematic time" (de Luca 31). This empty time is full of life, a life which Akerman brings out. *Sud* is a film about affective ecologies and the presence of silence. To explain what happens when nothing happens, we shall now consider Akerman's films in the light of the work of the mid-twentieth-century French philosopher Gilbert Simondon and one of the thinkers he inspired, Isabelle Stengers. In so doing, we move towards the question of how Akerman's film speaks to contemporary debates about the limits of anthropocentrism.

2. The Affective Subject and its Ontology

First it is important to go back to the original plans for *Sud*. Inspired by William Faulkner and James Baldwin (and by partial viewings of Harmony Korine's *Gummo* [1997]),[iv] Akerman wanted to make a film about the American South. In particular, she had been impressed by Baldwin's ability to render the oppressive silence of the South, and it was this unpleasant silence that drew the director of *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) to *Sud*. Akerman's plans changed with the murder of James Byrd Jr.. She now needed to address this specific crystallization of the silence she had come to film. But this does not mean that the original project disappeared. *Sud* remains a film about unpleasant silence, lingering affects, and the relationship between physical and mental landscapes. As such, it lends itself to a Simondonian approach.

The distinctiveness of Simondon's philosophy lies in the way he theorizes the relation between individuals and their world. His doctoral dissertation, *L'Individuation à la*

lumière des notions de forme et d'information (1958), begins with an original take on this issue. If we want to understand the individual, Simondon suggests, the worst approach we can take is to begin by considering the individual. If we begin with the individual – as has been customary in most of Western thought since Aristotle – and then seek to determine its relation to other individuals and to the world more widely, we will be stuck in a dualist ontology. It will be "me and the other", "the subject and the object". Simondon's ontology is not dualist. He therefore aims for what he calls "a complete change in the general approach to the principle governing individuation" (Simondon, 'The Genesis of the Individual' 300).

To explain this change, he often draws inspiration from the ways in which crystals are formed. This can happen in different ways. They may, for instance, emerge from a salt water solution. Various factors, such as the concentration of salt and the temperature of the solution, reach a level where a process of crystallization sets in. Bearing in mind some important differences between non-organic and organic individuation (that we cannot detail here), Simondon transposes this model to the field of psychic individuation in order to theorize an environment, which he terms the "preindividual situation" and in which processes of individuation eventually form something like an individual (the "crystal"). This individual will then become part of the environment. Simondon uses the term "transduction" to refer to the "phasing" through which the process of individuation and the environment are shaped.

It is important to understand that in this theory of individuation, no single entity acts. As Anne Sauvagnargues puts it, we "pass from an ontology of being to an ontology of becoming" (58); Miguel de Bestegui explains: "[t]he shift, then, is from beings as things to being as event" (168). Simondon furthermore specifies that this event is always ongoing,

for "individuation does not exhaust in the single act of its appearance all the potentials embedded in the preindividual state" ('The Genesis of the Individual' 300).

If Simondon has emerged as a key thinker in recent years (and prior to that in the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), it is because he invites us to think individuation in what we today would call a thoroughly anthropocenic way (and because he thinks our relation to technology in a similarly ecological manner). Our entanglement in the world is so fundamental that the individual can be reconfigured as what he terms an *individu-milieu* ('The Genesis of the Individual' 300). The individual is an environment that mediates a pre-individual reality, and out of which further processes of individuation will emerge. As Brian Massumi explains, for Simondon matter is "a *formtaking activity*" and human beings are part of that activity ('Technical Mentality Revisited' 31, my emphasis). This does not mean that Simondon's philosophy is "nonhuman", but it does mean that his ontology is non-anthropocentric, even as it allows for socio-political developments.[v]

In the present context, it is relevant to mention a rarely studied aspect of this theorization of individuation: the implications it has for Simondon's take on the issue of mortality. Broadly speaking, Simondon's individual is so ecological – so tied up in a situation that always exceeds it, and of which it can only be perceived as an incomplete and temporary mediation – that its death is only partial. When an individual disappears, Simondon writes, "it nullifies itself only in relation to its own interiority" (*L'Individuation* 244, my translation). The environment associated with the *individu-milieu* does not fall away; we do not take the world with us when we die. Rather, we leave a hole in this environment; a space before the hyphen in *individu-milieu*. Simondon suggests that we continue to be active as absences in relation to the environment. To characterize the ~~*individu*~~*-milieu* (my notation), Simondon invents expressions such as "negative

individuals", "individuality-holes" and "anti-individuals" (*L'Individuation* 244, my translations). These holes can be taken up by others – as it happens, he adds in a footnote, in various death rites.

Simondon's discussion of "individuality-holes" and "anti-individuals" appears in a chapter on individuation and affectivity. This section contains many of the elements that have informed recent debates about affects. Beginning with Massumi's 'The Autonomy of Affect' (first published in 1995), one form of contemporary affect theory has distinguished sharply between affects and emotions. In this account, affects are pre-subjective and intensive, whereas emotions are associated with the subject and its consciousness. Massumi proposes that emotion is the partial capture of the affective by a consciousness.[vi] In so doing, he is drawing on Simondon, who presents affectivity as the charge of the pre-individual as this pre-individual enters the individual. We can therefore say that when the individual dies, what remains is a kind of "affective charge" that now lies ready for other processes of individuation.

Simondon's ideas about individuality-holes and lingering affectivity may seem mystic (or they may – for people grieving, for instance – seem intuitively familiar). The reason for introducing them here is how strongly they resonate with Akerman's film. Bringing Simondon's ontology into dialogue with *Sud*, it is obvious that James Byrd Jr. is far from absent. Although Akerman never shows an image of Byrd, "his presence haunts the entire film" (as quoted above). Most obviously, he is present throughout the exhausting seven-minute take that ends the film. We stare at the tarmac, notice the markings, the light slowly fades, and as the shot goes on and on, the absence/presence of Byrd becomes intense and overwhelming. Byrd is present at the memorial service too; here Akerman moves close to the pain of the family members in a scene that effectively works like a death

rite. Furthermore, he is far from alone in being present. Also present are all the ancestors evoked by interviewees – for instance, by a woman who explains that in Jasper some trees are leaning because they were once used for lynchings. As a result, when we see trees later on in the film, we no longer see just trees. Similarly, when Akerman films the black prisoners working in the fields, under surveillance by a white guard on a horse, we see both past and present life in the American South. In the shots of the beautiful cotton fields there are no human beings, but the weight of the "individuality-holes" is overpowering: these ripple across the landscapes, informing all the images in the film, heightening its affective charge.

As Akerman makes clear in a 2004 interview with Miriam Rosen, the durational aesthetic plays a key role in making the absences weigh on the spectator. Initially commenting on her earlier documentary *D'Est* (*From the East*, 1993) she explains:

> In all these so-called documentary films, there are always different layers. These are just people waiting for a bus, but they still evoke other things. They may evoke the line in the camps or in wartime. In *Sud* a tree evokes a black man who might have been hanged. If you show a tree for two seconds, this layer won't be there — there will just be a tree. (qtd. in Rosen, 124)[vii]

It is crucial to add that Akerman brings her own experience to this environment. As suggested by the quote above, Akerman frequently noted that *Sud* was haunted by her previous film *D'Est*. *D'Est* was concerned with the state of Eastern Europe in the years following the fall of the Berlin wall. It was about "History and histories, fear, mass graves, the hate of others and oneself, and also about the explosion of beauty" (Akerman qtd. in

Liénard 132, my translation). It was a film about Jewish history, and this history now finds its way into the affective landscapes of Texas. When Akerman shows fields protected by barbed wire fences, we therefore also see the individuality-holes that she – the daughter of Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors[viii] – brought with her from Europe. Specifically, we may see the reference to Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1956). Moreover, like Rose Capp and many others we may find that Akerman's slow-moving shots of deserted landscapes recall Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). This parallel is strengthened by her decision not to use archival images from the Byrd case, but instead – like Lanzmann – to rely strongly on interviews. Asked about this resemblance, Akerman responded that it was accidental and that she had never had the courage to watch Lanzmann's film (MacDonald 265). Whether accidental or not, her film carefully creates a space for the black and Jewish experiences to resonate, a space where vulnerability – respectfully and almost beyond the level of representation – is met with vulnerability.

This ambition to allow for resonance between black and Jewish experiences takes place in a manner that is difficult to map: it takes place in a ghostly register where no precise claim is made about the relation between these affective experiences. What is clear, however, is that *Sud*'s move to the affective and environmental does not present itself as a step away from issues of race and class. On the contrary, Akerman's film precisely communicates that the affective experience of an environment depends on race (as it does on class, sexuality, history, etc.). If we think that the landscapes on screen are shared, that the beautiful surroundings of Jasper belong to all, we are mistaken.[ix] Akerman's ethical ambition is to bring out the racial and historical dimension, in the hope that eventually a genuine sharing can begin to take place.

Because the event Akerman narrates is so violent and emotionally overpowering, and because the suffering and injustice are associated with the Holocaust, there is a risk of overlooking the manner in which the "individuality-holes" become available to the spectator. However, if we wish to understand the nature of political agency in non-anthropocentric ontologies, it is important to analyze in greater detail how affect is transmitted. In a slightly different context, Clive Barnett has pointed to what he sees as a tension within much affect theory: on the one hand, affects are presented as being in excess of the individual; on the other, theoreticians like William Connolly and Nigel Thrift are keen to use (even instrumentalize) the affective excess. In other words, how do we make operative the very elements that escape us?[x]

Let us first consider two examples of how Akerman shapes her material. In the first of these examples, she shoots from the window of a car driving through a beautiful dense forest. The leaves are a dark green color, sunlight filters through the foliage, and the soundtrack is dominated by swarming insects and the chirping of a bird. The take lasts sixty seconds, the car journey covers several hundred meters, but the noises of the bird and insects remain constant throughout. At some point, the spectator realizes that Akerman has decoupled sound and image, that the camera moves and the microphone does not. "We advance… and yet are stuck…", "The images are shadowed by something that cannot be shaken off…", "The world is disjointed…", no matter how we describe the experience of this scene, the beauty becomes eerie. This is exactly what Akerman intends:

> I hope to make you waltz with the pleasure that nature, a trip to the country, can give, pleasure and its thrill. Until you start having doubts about this pleasure, until

> there emerges a feeling of horror and even of tragedy in a leaden silence. (qtd. in Schmid 111)

Secondly, the film's narrative structure deserves attention. Generally, the interviewees are seen only once. The only exception occurs when the details of the murder are presented. Akerman begins by interviewing a black man who unwittingly heard the murder as it happened. Late at night, while he was watching a western, he heard noises outside his window, but could not determine their origin. The next day, there were police everywhere: "They had found the body". At this cliffhanger point, before the spectator knows what has happened, Akerman interrupts the interview and cuts to the first footage of the road on which James Byrd Jr. was killed. We are given the final part of his voyage, and after ninety seconds the car comes to a halt at the cemetery. Then Akerman cuts to the local journalist, who reveals the identity of the body that the black man was talking about, and gives a systematic account of the crime. With this composition, Akerman builds suspense – interrupting the interview with the black man – and prioritizes an affective and sensorial engagement with the murder, before finally providing us with the elements that allow us to make sense of the images.

At the very end of the film, Akerman then returns to the aural witness who has the last word on the events. Previously, he was interviewed inside his house, the blinds were down and artificial light created the impression of a nighttime interview. Now, he is outside in the daylight. Comparing the scenes, we realize that in fact both sections of the interview were shot during the day (daylight is coming through the blinds in the first part of the interview). Akerman clearly wanted to dramatize the first, interrupted interview sequence to make it easier for the spectator to sit, as it were, alongside the interviewee, in a state of

ignorance, in the middle of the night of the murder. After the second half of the interview, Akerman cuts to the final seven-minute take. This footage does not reprise the part of the journey that was previously shown; this time the car does not reach the cemetery, but instead the screen fades to black before we arrive. This choice can only be seen as a refusal of closure.[xi]

Fig. 2. Chantal Akerman, final scene, *Sud* (1999)

Such discreet signs of directorial presence demonstrate how carefully Akerman edits her material to maximize its impact. We may say that these are examples of how the affective environments can be shaped or even instrumentalized.

But this is not the full story. Akerman is not only concerned with achieving a specific spectatorial response, she is also and above all responding to the material she is filming.

This material acts on her, and Akerman frequently and eloquently speaks about this experience. Presenting *Sud*, she asks:

> How do the trees and the whole natural environment evoke so intensely death, blood and the weight of history? How does the present call up the past? And how does this past, with a mere gesture or a simple regard, haunt and torment you as you wander along an empty cotton field or a dusty country road? (qtd. in Sultan 20)

So even if it is true that Akerman forms her material for the spectator, it is also true (as the quotation above makes clear) that this act of form-taking at least partly escapes a dialectic between filmmaker and spectator – the landscapes have their say too. When Akerman works with the landscapes and their affects, she is taken up by a process in which neither she nor anyone else seems to be the center. Further evidence of this excess is found in the epigraph at the start of this article, where Akerman expresses a desire to see how a landscape may remember itself through the film and the spectator. Here, we are close to a form of thinking that can be associated with Simondon's transduction, or with a process-relational ontology such as that of Alfred North Whitehead, for whom "consciousness itself is nothing other than the hosting of other entities that act through it", as Mark Hansen puts it (x). Even if we mustn't overlook the task that "hosting" implies, such formulations invite us to leave behind the anthropocentric perspective, and to think of ourselves as what I propose to call a "spectator-environment". This spectatorial position can be theorized with the Simondon-inspired philosopher Isabelle Stengers's notion of *practice*. But first, a short methodological clarification is appropriate.

As mentioned, Akerman has often spoken about her desire to give form to – or to

host – the affects and ghosts that haunt the world she films. For instance, she developed the notion of "distilled images" in relation to *D'Est* in an attempt to explain, in the words of Kate Rennebohm, how one can "evok[e] the presence of a traumatic history through its seeming absence". It is therefore not surprising that many critics have picked up on this dimension in her work, and very often the theoretical frameworks used to describe the relation between spectators and film, between presence and absence, and between mental and physical landscapes have been phenomenological, psychoanalytic and/or inspired by trauma theory. There are good reasons for this, and these frameworks have therefore also produced excellent readings of Akerman's work.

The Simondonian approach used here has a complex relation to phenomenology – one that is far from being simply antagonistic.[xii] It is not possible to map this intricate relation in the present text, but in order to bring out the specificity of the present reading, it might still be helpful to insist on the distinctiveness of Simondon's ontology. Whereas phenomenology generally seeks to theorize relations between subject and objects, often with a view to softening or overcoming such distinctions (for instance, via notions of the erotic and the haptic), Simondon's philosophy – as we have seen – *starts* from a non-dualist perspective. He explores the (necessarily incomplete) processes of individuation as they momentarily manifest themselves in the *individu-milieu*. Simondon's framework is therefore non-anthropocentric – something twentieth-century phenomenology neither claims nor seeks to be. If this article has been drawing on Simondon, it is because *Sud* encourages this move towards a non-anthropocentric framework. The film offers an experience in which relations between landscapes and characters, and between the film and spectators, are reconfigured to a point where notions of intersubjectivity and interaction need to be supplemented by a framework that can give the more transient

nature of the affective environment its due. Simondon and Massumi are helpful in this regard, as is Stengers's notion of practice.

Like Simondon, Stengers writes about the kinds of practices in which scientists engage, but her observations are also relevant to artistic and spectatorial practices. A practice, she explains with a very Akerman-like formulation, is about "giving to the situation the power to make us think and feel" (Stengers 185). Importantly, this definition distributes initiative evenly between situation and practitioner. Furthermore, Stengers emphasizes that practices are generated by *specific* situations: "There is no identity of a practice independent of its environment" (187). Obviously, this does not mean that humans are blank slates when approaching a situation, but it does mean that a practice is site-specific, and that different environments produce different practices. This is why Stengers distinguishes the notion of *practice* from that of *habit*. Habits are actions performed across various situations – they prevent us from accessing the specificity of a situation. Practices, on the contrary, are tailored responses to concrete situations. This idea of practice not only captures how we are meant to relate to a film such as *Sud*, but also comes very close to the ways in which Akerman herself speaks about her work. For instance, Akerman notes that when she makes non-fiction films, she never works with a script. She goes on site, talks to people, tries to access what is there, and hopes that in the process she will, as she puts it, "find a film". Using the verb "find" in a very different way, she similarly warns against the violence of preconceived plans: "she who seeks shall find, find all too well, and manipulate things a little too much in order to find them" (Akerman 20–22).

It follows from Stengers's idea about practices that there is an emancipatory dimension in turning habits into practice. Although we cannot live without habits, it is important to acknowledge the danger of getting stuck in them (think of Jeanne Dielman!),

and conversely, the potential for being liberated by practices. One of Stengers's key terms for thinking about the switch from one to the other is "hesitation". Habits are the actions we perform without hesitating, whereas hesitation opens up the possibility of a move from habit to practice. This article has argued that *Sud* works with suspension; this suspension can now be recast as hesitation. It breaks habits – for instance the habits of narrative cinema, of causal linkages, of rushing towards judgement – and instead invites us to respond to the concrete situation, opening towards a different ontology. In *Sud* (and throughout Akerman's work) duration is one such form of practice. As the camera rolls, the relations change between spectator, image and the subject matter appearing in the image. These adjustments in the distribution of the sensible are interventions that not only expand our understanding of what film art can be, but also allow spectators to see (their own place in) the world differently, and notice, for instance, the "individuality-holes" and lingering affectivity that undercut strong distinctions between humans and the worlds from which they come. In this manner, the practice of Akerman's film invites us to think about how we, as environments, are caught up in other environments, thereby remapping existing ecologies; it invites us to experience ourselves as spectator-environments.

In conclusion, let us return to the theoretical debate evoked at the beginning of this article. We have seen that *Sud* holds together a number of frameworks that do not always work in harmony. In the first place, *Sud* contains what has been called a journalistic dimension. Indeed, it comes across as one of Akerman's more explicitly political films. It is therefore important to offer a sociological reading of the film – for instance by focusing on the role religion can be made to play in the American South, on how white authorities may use general socio-economic problems as an excuse for *not* dealing with racism, and on how black resistance can be expressed through moments of musical performance. At the same

time, the many landscape shots, the displacement from action and characters to duration and place, complement and prompt us to reconsider this journalistic dimension. The effect of this is twofold.

On the one hand, *Sud* thereby points to the danger of relying on the socio-political frameworks that dominate mainstream (film) culture. It is as if Akerman worries that these frameworks (which feed our desire to evaluate and judge) contain too much of the violence they are trying to oppose. The interruption does not entirely undercut the sociological dimension of Akerman's film; "avant-garde journalism" is still a form of journalism. *Sud* both draws on and departs from a long tradition of political film. It invites us to respond to the injustices presented in the film, while also demanding that we think critically about the discursive frameworks we apply when seeking to expose this violence.

On the other hand, the moments of narrative suspension and the many landscape scenes are more than an interruption of common discursive frameworks – they are also inroads into a different ontology and a different understanding of subjectivity. In *Sud*, hesitation reveals a world that would normally be occluded by a narrow focus on actions and characters. In this world, we find a softening of distinctions between humans and environments, between mental and physical landscapes, and between living and non-living entities. What surfaces here is a non-anthropocentric ontology, in which the individual is rethought as an environment in an environment. As we saw, Akerman is explicit about this: she sets out to investigate the links between physical and mental landscapes, and eventually suggests a different conceptualization of the spectator, who becomes a space in which the landscapes (and their ghosts) may remember themselves and what lies beneath their beauty.

This non-anthropocentric ontology is different from the one found Hegelian and Marxist traditions, but it is not a way of leaving politics behind. *Sud*'s affective environments remain racially marked and Akerman's film works to bring out these racial differences. The film thereby highlights the necessity of considering the political dimension of (both physical and affective) spaces in Jasper.

The theoretical debates about non-anthropocentric ontology and political agency have been virulent. Adrian Johnston, for instance, associates the writings of affect-theoreticians and new materialists such as William Connolly and Jane Bennett with "a modest micropolitics of nudging and tinkering of with one's selfhood" (313-14), with "weakly emerging not-quite-subjects" (314), and then he goes via Žižek (and Wagner's *Parsifal*) in a call for more Cartesianism:

> Even if post-Cartesian modernism has been complicit in contributing to the dire state of the earth's ecosystems nowadays, Žižek, with his Marxist dialectical tendencies (and Wagnerian sensibilities), insists that, as he would put it, the wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it. (317)

This hyper-masculinist rhetoric is motivated by the resistance to what Johnston and Žižek perceive to be a naïve and mystic embrace of matter in the work of Bennett and Connolly.

As should be clear from my reading of *Sud*, there are no innocent landscapes in this film and the spectator-environment is therefore not an escape from politics. But what is remarkable about Akerman, in the context of the theoretical debates above, is the ease with which her film combines the different frameworks she draws upon. In *Sud*, the sociologically oriented interview sequences easily combine with ghostly, shamanistic

explorations of affective environments; and studying *Sud* we find the filmmaker has no difficulty moving between the role as *director* (she edits her material to heighten its affective charge) and *practitioner* (she "finds a film" through which the landscapes can remember themselves). The spectator is invited to participate in these movements, and very few of us will respond by seeking ontological clarification ("to what extent are you acting?"). This is because Akerman operates in a field where "agency" has been a complicated issue at least since the Ancient Greeks: art.[xiii]

Notes

[i] Even if Akerman did not set out to make a tetralogy, the documentaries *D'Est* (*From the East*, 1993), *Sud* (1999), *De l'autre côté* (*From the Other Side*, 2002) and *Là-bas* (*Down There*, 2006) belong together as politically charged explorations of specific geographical places (Russia and Eastern Europe, the American South, the border between the USA and Mexico, and Tel Aviv). The first and last of these titles also inspired installation works.

[ii] Watching these opening scenes, we may wonder if the African-American citizens know that they are being filmed. Some spectators may worry that the camera objectifies the African-Americans, and more generally, that it is being intrusive. Akerman is aware of this danger, and her film quickly dramatizes the problem: in the first scene where the camera moves, an African-American man drives up on the side of Akerman's car and looks straight into the lens.

[iii] In the following discussion, I am referring to the conference panel "Contextualising True Crime Narratives" that Staci Stutsman chaired at the 2017 SCMS conference in Chicago. In addition to Stutsman, Elizabeth Gailey, Tanya Horeck and Melinda Lewis contributed to the panel.

[iv] Akerman explains that during a visiting fellowship at Harvard University, she would, on her way back and forth to classes, stop by the campus cinema and watch ten minutes of *Gummo* because it happened to be playing. She was moved and disturbed by Korine's film. She understood it to be a film about nothing, set in a desolate town, and thought that she would respond by making a film about "something". This something turned out to be more disturbing than nothing.

[v] The distinction between nonhuman and non-anthropocentric is important. The first term is perhaps the most common, having been promoted to the title of Grusin's volume. It can be debated whether this term is helpful, but when it comes to the study of Simondon (who had no ambition to escape the human) it can only confuse.

[vi] Brian Massumi sums up: "affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the intensest (most contracted) expression of that capture – and of the fact that something has always and again escaped" (*The Politics of Affects* 106).

[vii] In addition to revealing the multilayered nature of the images, the durational aesthetic also brings out the presence of death: "when most people go to the movies, the ultimate compliment for them is to say, 'We didn't notice time pass!' With me, you see the time pass. And feel it pass. You also sense that this is the time that leads toward death" (124).

[viii] Much more could be – and has been – said about this important question, not least about how her mother, who survived Auschwitz, did not talk about her experiences. This created what Akerman calls a "loud silence" and "childhood full of holes" (qtd. in Schmid 2).

[ix] A more schematic approach to the idea of overlaid environments can be found in a recent video installation by Penny Woolcock: *When the same road is a different road* (2018). A point-of-view shot takes us through a neighborhood in North London. The audio-track cuts between two accounts of what we see: the director narrates how she came to the neighborhood, she speaks about where you can buy Prosecco on tap, and how the

environment has changed over the years; a local gang member explains where drugs are sold, where friends were injured, what streets to stay away from.

[x] Barnett sets out to demonstrate that "the combination of a rhetoric of manipulation with a strong ontological claim about the conceptual priority of affective registers over deliberative ones [generates] a normative blind spot in these political ontologies of affect" (187).

[xi] It is an exaggeration to claim that the final scene "can only be seen as a refusal of closure". For Koehler, the final scene offers no less than an aesthetic redemption of reality – a reanimation in art: "Her camera maps a motion that signifies itself, a literal dance of death without bodies, a pure interaction of lens, light, asphalt, motion, and air, a reanimation of the dead" (20).

[xii] Maurice Merleau-Ponty was present at Simondon's doctoral viva in 1958, and when Simondon published his dissertation in 1964, it was dedicated to Merleau-Ponty. It is remarkable how close the two thinkers are in late 1950s, and I would argue that Merleau-Ponty's second lecture series on nature in particular (1957-1958) presents distinct overlaps with Simondon's dissertation. Simondon is the only doctoral student that Merleau-Ponty ever mentioned in his writings (see Barbaras et al.).

[xiii] Precisely because artists and aesthetic theory have such a rich tradition for thinking what we might calls "degrees of agency", affect-theoreticians have been keen to explore how art may inspire politics. Thrift and Amin for instance write about *The Arts of the Political* when seeking to outline their conception of a contemporary leftwing politics, and Massumi about the "art of the event" (*The Power at the End of Economy*).

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