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Remake: Chantal Akerman's and John Smith's plays on reality

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Introduction

According to the Oxford Dictionary a remake is the action of making something *again* or *differently*, as well as a film or a music piece that has been recorded again. The construction of Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (1976) and John Smith's *The Man Phoning Mum* (2011) can be traced back to the same practice. For the purpose of this discussion I consider the concept of the remake in terms of its elements of repetition and the fundamental presupposition of a viewership. Both authors deal with a re-recording of a previous experience: Smith's can be properly regarded as a filmic event, while Akerman's is rather a personal one. The remake's act of repetition at the basis of both films is found at different stages of the filmmaking practice (in the conception stage for Akerman and during development for Smith, as will be detailed later). When considered within a broader debate on intertextuality the analogy with the remake offers a useful framework to understand the relationship of both films with the topic of reality as well as their link with 'the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a [film] culture'.^[1] Finally, the idea of the remake is here relevant for what it presupposes in terms of audience engagement; in order to exist a remake needs a spectatorship to acknowledge it as such

according to its intertextual legacies.[2] In light of such a mutual condition both films trigger crucial reactions in the viewer for their very unfoldment.

The essay will begin by contextualising Akerman's film within the autoethnographic practice and Smith's within the structuralist materialist movement. Then, it will outline the structure of the two films with reference to Svetlana Boym's differentiation between restoring and reflecting nostalgia. By highlighting the parodic attitude in regards to traditional documentary filmmaking at play in both pieces, the essay will focus on the employment of sound and image disjunction as methods that challenge the cinematic language. Finally, two trends coexisting in both films – the *remake of the self* and the *remake of reality* – outline stylistic and content conditions that give an impression of hyperreality and call upon the viewership as a crucial part of the cinematic conversation.

Autoethnography and structuralism

Akerman's *News From Home* is situated in the framework of autoethnography, an anthropological practice and research methodology that links the individual, personal experience of the author (as an anthropologist or filmmaker) to a broader social and political context. Autoethnographic accounts are deeply intimate, vulnerable, and imply the fundamental acknowledgement that no final outcome (as in film or text, for instance) can be objective. The voice of the author is often shaped after an 'I' that nevertheless underlines the ambiguity and irony coming with such an ideological and artistic stance. Catherine Russell argues that the autoethnographic storyteller presents a 'staging of subjectivity – a representation of the self as performance',[3] and in a similar vein James Clifford coined the term 'self-fashioning'.[4] These expressions emphasise a crucial aspect of *News From Home*: Akerman's overarching presence and her voice-over providing both coherence and fragmentation to the film. Other elements (such as the critical treatment of the Other as subject/object) that render *News From Home* an autoethnographic work will be explored further in the essay.

Smith trained and debuted in a different context: the structuralist materialist movement that arose out of the London Film Maker's Co-Op (now LUX) in the late 1970s. Peter Gidal outlines the characteristics of this movement that included filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow (who worked with Akerman's main collaborator, editor Babette Man-

golte[5]). Structuralist films aim at revealing the structure of filmmaking in such a way that

each film is a record (...) of its making. (...) Thus viewing such a film is at once viewing a film and viewing the 'coming into presence' of the film, i.e. the system of consciousness that produces the work, that is produced by and in it.[6]

Although Smith placed himself outside the strict approach theorised by Gidal,[7] the film that launched Smith as filmmaker and as the source for the later *The Man Phoning Mum* (*The Girl Chewing Gum*, from 1976) does reflect an intent to demystify and dismantle the illusionary nature of narrative cinema.

Restoring nostalgia and reflecting nostalgia as styles of remake

Smith's film can be understood as a remake in the most literary meaning of the term – or, according to Robert Eberwein's taxonomy of remakes, 'a sound film made by the same director in the same country' and 'a film that changes the colour of the original'.[8] *The Man Phoning Mum* is a very accurate remake of the 1976 film *The Girl Chewing Gum* (both 11 minutes long). Smith filmed the same subject – a street corner in East London – with the exact same camera movements; however, a disorienting product results from the 2011 version of the 1976 original archetype. Not only because recording tools (black-and-white Super 8 became colour HD video), places, and people changed in 30 years, but mostly because the two versions are displayed simultaneously. While the two films run overlapped voice-over is employed to convey information. The original soundscape and voice-over from *The Girl Chewing Gum* are kept also in the 2011 version as a leading structure for understanding the story, and thus the author offers the viewer an enriched and yet conservative version of the original.

Although Akerman's *News From Home* cannot be traced to an 'original source' in the traditional sense, the film's conception suggests the idea that Akerman sketched the film with other means before its realisation. Shot in 1976 but inspired by a prior (her first) visit to New York between 1971 and 1972, the 85-minute film is a collection of images of the American city woven together by the author's voice-over. The Belgian director, in a sloppy and quick manner, reads letters that her mother sent her during her first

stay; an additional traffic soundscape completes the movie, often intruding into the filmmaker's soliloquy and covering parts of it. In an interview with Angela Martin the author alludes to the rationale behind *News From Home*:

[i]t's my relationship to New York. (...) So I was there seven months and then left and I went back a few months later. And I was in the plane and I thought—my mother is going to send me those letters *again*. And *I was already imagining my life in New York*. That's how I got the idea of the film.[9]

During her first stay in New York the filmmaker researched and planned another film set in the metropolis (*Hanging out Yonkers* [1973, never completed]). It was only when she returned in 1976, after her return to Belgium to shoot *Je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman* (both 1975), that Akerman finally produced *News From Home*. Considering her statement above it emerges that the film was based on a 'memory of projection towards the future'. Another aspect of the composition complicates the chronology, since Akerman used the letters sent by her mother in 1972 as textual basis for her 1976 storytelling. Discussing the concept of the remake, Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal advocate for an 'extension of the boundaries of the term (...) to include as well works resulting from the contact between diverse cultures and different media'.[10] The authors mention Bill Nichols' observation on the intermingling of fiction and nonfiction today[11] and 'suggest that the remake both pays tribute to a preexisting text and, on another level, calls it into question'.[12] In this sense, to claim that *News From Home* is a remake may be ultimately accurate – particularly if we consider that Akerman produced two versions of the same voice-over, one in French with English subtitles and one in English.[13]

I believe Svetlana Boym's understanding of nostalgia as 'an ache of temporal distance and displacement'[14] to be crucial in order to understand Akerman's and Smith's impulse to recreate a (personal and filmic) previous experience. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym outlines two different types of nostalgia, *restorative* and *reflective*: 'if restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialise time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalises space'.[15] Style and content concerns of *News from Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum* can thus be ascribed, respectively, to the latter and the former type of nostalgia. In regards to the latter, on the occasion of the Transmediale 2013 held at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, John Smith was asked about the filming process of *The Man*

Phoning Mum. He immediately specified that the shooting was streamlined; thanks to an iPhone playing *The Girl Chewing Gum* fixed on the top of his HD camera, he could perfectly mirror the 1976 sequences. Smith's recovery of early material through the remake grasps the past as 'a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a *perfect snapshot*'.^[16] According to Boym, restoring operations refer to repetition and selectivity – two action methods that allow perfect continuity with the past. No wonder then that *The Man Phoning Mum* is composed (exactly as *The Girl Chewing Gum*) by only two long sequences taking place in two locations: the first, about ten minutes long, is shot at a medium distance at a street corner in Hackney; the second (about one minute long) is filmed on a country field in a wider shot. When remaking this second sequence in 2011, Smith relegated his comments to some brief intertitles; it is the only moment in the remake when the director adds new 'verbal' information.

Contrary to Smith's refusal to share any personal insights in *The Man Phoning Mum*, in *News From Home* the filmmaker's main preoccupation is the expression of her autobiography. In contrast with Smith's impulse triggered by a restorative nostalgia, Akerman's motivation in relation to past events is directed by a reflective nostalgia which 'is more about individual and cultural memory'.^[17] The material composing *News From Home* is not only the recalling of wanderings in New York and oxymoronic 'memories of the future' as seen above. A crucial component of the film is also the relationship with what's left behind, represented by the mother's words. 'It's more like *the shock between her life, her world and what New York really is*',^[18] Akerman added when asked about the filmmaking process. The film appears to be shaped by two emotional tensions: a sense of hope for the future in the new city, and the feeling of disorientation and rupture as consequence of leaving the homeland. The words of Akerman's mother symbolise this distance and the space in between. In such a way the filmmaker poignantly acknowledges that 'a modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once'.^[19] Moreover, Akerman found herself in the condition of translating her mother's letters from French into English;^[20] the aural representation of the mother through the reading provides an ongoing dialogue with the different spatial and chronological states, thus standing for both the gap and the bond experienced by the protagonist (and spectator). While Boym states that these two forms of nostalgia 'use the same triggers of memory and symbols (...) but they tell different stories about it',^[21] I argue that although Akerman's and Smith's works differ in the stories they tell they

equally challenge storytelling and the cinematic language. Such a reading develops through to a voice-over/soundscape/image dialectic arising from both films, enabling the organisation of the complex yet cohesive structure of *News from Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum*.

Image-sound disjunction and cohesive soundscapes

With ‘John Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality”[22] in mind, we can say that *News From Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum* share the same playful attitude towards traditional documentary practice. Smith constructs *The Girl Chewing Gum* (and therefore *The Man Phoning Mum* too, since the sound from the 1976 production remains the same in the remake) as though the storyteller was directing the framed reality. He speaks instructions to the pedestrians to move in one or another direction, cross the street, or just pass by; he addresses cars and pigeons with the same expressions he uses for people: ‘[n]ow the mother and the two boys... and I want the smaller boy to point to the right...’. The viewer finally realises the absurdity of the film when the director shouts ‘I want the clock to move gently towards me’, when of course it is only the camera zooming in on the designated clock.



Fig. 1: John Smith, *The Man Phoning Mum*, 2011, still. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

The viewer feels like being on a feature film location, with the narrator directing extras via the megaphone, encouraging those walking too shyly ('good...!' is a frequent refrain). The detailed descriptions in voice-over seem to somehow mock the style of traditional nature documentaries. Nonetheless, *The Girl Chewing Gum* could easily have become a throwaway parody of conventional documentary form (...) but instead it powerfully explores the links between image and sound, constantly making us aware of the multiple ways in which films tend to guide our reading of the image.[23] Talking about the 1976 film, Smith stated that it was, to some extent, also a response to some one-sided documentaries:

[i]t's got to do with labelling, and how we perceive things, how we're told what things are. There's an awful way in which documentaries can completely subvert the real world. (...) The power of the text is so strong, that the image appears to be what the voice is telling us it is.[24]

The expectations associated with traditional ethnographic film are similarly brought into question by Akerman's work. The narration in *News From Home* develops through a foreign female voice reading with a French accent; the contrast between the images of New York City and the situations evoked by the mother's letters follows, to a certain extent, the typical scheme of a documentary film: 'the voice-over as objective and at home, which is re-

inforced with what the camera shows, that is “other” and not at home’.[25] Considering the film’s context, it is important to stress that ‘the autoethnographic subject blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other (...) becoming a stranger in a strange land’.[26] In Akerman’s film the Other is at times the city, her mother, even herself. In this context – also resonating with the remake claim in terms of audience engagement – it is important to highlight Mary Louise Pratt’s observation:

[a]utoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as autochthonous forms of expressions or self-representation (...). Rather they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis (...). Autoethnographic works are often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker’s own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate.[27]



Fig. 2: Chantal Akerman, *News From Home*, 1976. Still.

Both the ironic disengagement of Smith’s film and Akerman’s reinvented narrative mode thus borrow elements from documentary practice. By stressing the different characteristics of visual and aural and their impact on the viewer, both authors consciously play with the disjunction of image and sound. In the case of *News From Home* the sound is not synched and is in fact recorded afterwards. In some sequences moving vehicles are accompanied by the expected timing and amount of honking and wheel acceleration, so that the viewer is deceived into believing he/she is a witness of truthful documentation. However, in other scenes the disharmony be-

tween the city's frantic activity and the lack of traffic sounds (and vice versa – sometimes we are presented with empty streets filled by the noise of cars) is fully perceived by the spectator, who acknowledges the trick and is taken over by the disorienting feeling created thereby:

[t]he whole idea of sync sound is, in a way, subverted; I give the feeling of sync sound but it's not the way other filmmakers do it. I did the sound the way I wanted. What you hear is like waves of sound arriving. But they are not sync sounds. Even the subway doors, I didn't put all of the sounds. Every sound was a choice.[28]

Smith's storytelling is also clearly a product of subsequent recordings; he reviewed the footage in order to write a fitting script. By doing so openly Smith decides to play with his audience, which can decide whether or not to play along:

[a] number of the films I've made have very much to do with taking the viewer to the edge of psychological immersion, but then pulling out again, so one is made aware of the construction of the film. The fact that the films reveal their artifice is important to all of them.[29]

How then do images and sounds interact within multilayered works such as *News from Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum* when considered beyond the alienation strategies they employ? In both films soundscapes work like a glue that recomposes the fracture generated by voice-over and footage. In Akerman's work the soundscape is conceived as a third element from the very beginning, creating a self-sufficient scheme that can be summarised as follows:

voice-over (reading letters) | soundscape (traffic noise) | images (New York)

The sound of the buzzing city is cleansed of any human voice, allowing for cohesion between the aural-epistolary layer and the visual-fragmented landscape. Even when it emerges as a disturbing element, covering bits of the mother's letters, its aim is to underline the disconnection between home and abroad, past and present, the mother's projections and the daughter's perceptions of the displayed reality. By simply filling the void in between the film's narrative poles the soundscape provides the unity questioned by the disjunction of image and sound.

A similar mechanism is at work in *The Man Phoning Mum*. During most of the first sequence we hear an alarm ringing alongside Smith's storytelling; it seems part of the urban soundtrack. Just two minutes before switching

from the street sequence to the field the alarm ceases to ring (though the voice-over says it is still functioning); in the sudden silence the voice-over alone mixes information both about the country view (that we cannot yet see) and the city activity, until it introduces the turning point, following it with the camera: a man who just robbed the local post office ‘tries to remain calm but his hand is sweating as he grips the button of the revolver in his raincoat pocket even harder’. For the first time the filmmaker gives an insight into the characters’ feelings and stops directing/describing them. About two minutes later, when the alarm starts ringing again, we are presented with the second sequence – a wide shot of an open field – and inter-titles appear to convey the only comments added in the 2011 remake. As in *News From Home*, *The Man Phoning Mum* and its dialectic contrast between sound and image acquires meaningfulness within an interaction that can be illustrated as follows:

voice-over (storytelling) | soundscape (alarm) | images (street corner; field)

The soundscape triggers the story’s turning point and at the same time unmasks the fictional aspect inspiring the film. In this sense both Akerman’s and Smith’s use of sound challenges the notions of ‘truth’, ‘perception’, and ‘reality’ within the traditional and documentary film practice and cinematographic language. Two coexisting trends emerge from this formal approach – the *remake of the self* and the *remake of reality* – that revolve around the realistic core of both films, calling on the spectator as a crucial part of a hyperreal experience.

Remaking the everyday: Staged and increased realities

Akerman and Smith share an interest in simple subjects who often live ordinary lives; interwoven with these topics is of course their filmmaking philosophy. Smith’s work has been linked to that of Varda, Chris Marker, Derek Jarman, and Akerman herself – all authors who are close to the ‘day-to-day process or act of filmmaking, and art as quotidian, living and incorporative process rather than as a rarefied means of heightened expression’.[30] Moreover, the portrait of Akerman that film critics draw is quite similar to Smith: ‘Akerman has a genius for looking closely at aspects of our lives that take up so much of our time but that we often don’t take seriously, for getting into big social and political issues without stepping outside the

texture of daily life'.[31] As pointed out by Ivone Marguiles, the 'phenomenology of the everyday'[32] is a pivotal centre of Akerman's early works and works by Smith. For instance, Smith's explorations are driven by the urge to compile a 'historic topography' that documents the transformations of Hackney – a place of emotional inspiration and personal attachment, yet examined with an almost scientific outlook. Analysing *The Girl Chewing Gum* and *The Man Phoning Mum*, Martin Herbert points out several characteristics of Smith's approach: 'the local as generous world-enfolding microcosm, (...) how film might compress time, the ambient or hard-to-see issues that might be foregrounded as a result'.[33] Zooming in on the simple object, Smith establishes new categories of normal and exceptional, leading the viewer to reconsider what he/she passes by every day and is used to 'dismiss as suitable subject for contemplation, art and imagination'.[34] Nevertheless, this enriching process activated by Smith's visual and verbal associations does not seek to suggest anything beyond what is framed; the inhabitants of Smith's world are shared and told in such a way that they can appear real and tangible to everyone.[35]

Akin to Smith's attention to detail is Akerman's particular sensibility in depicting the female universe as well as the urban environment. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* is the most representative in this respect. The film is a collection of *mises en scène* of three days in the life of a single woman and develops through 201 minutes almost without dialogues,[36] in which Jeanne's domestic activities are filmed just as they are, with no added cinematic interpretation, the camera resting 'for the maximum amount of time on something boring before there is a cut to a new static set-up and a prolonged stare and something even more boring'.[37] Similar to Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), 'nothing happens' – to mention the title of the Akerman monograph by Ivone Marguiles. Considering the relationship between Akerman's oeuvre and realism, she notes:

[r]ealist films entail more than a 'documentary' record of reality: as we analyse them, it becomes clear that they seek adequacy in two main functions: first to act as visual, aural analogies with perceptual reality, and second, to fulfil a notion of representativeness.[38]

Again, similar to Snow's *Wavelength* (one of Smith's models[39]), in *News From Home* the camera lingers on those scenarios exhibited as devoid of agitated happenings; yet 'the rigid formal parameters set for each film (...),

the fixed symmetrical shots (...) allow chance events to define themselves as privileged foci of attention'.[40]

1. *Remakes of reality*

In this regard the notion of the remake sheds light on the collaboration between a realistic content and a self-aware conception of filmmaking. Both films propose an idea of reality which is re-made – either by faking the direction of Dalston street life or narrating New York through repeated wanderings and re-read letters, the final outcome can be labeled as a *remake of reality*. In this way the two pieces bring to the screen images of a staged reality which exploits the actors and the landscape in the scenario to test the viewer's ability to recognise the performed game. While Smith achieves this by revealing the materiality and intertextuality of film, Akerman constructs her autoethnographic remake through a peculiar framing of space and time (what Giuliana Bruno calls 'laboured images'[41]). When asked about the provenance of *The Girl Chewing Gum*, Smith asserts his sympathy for occasional events and explains how the artistic conception often takes place after the shooting, during the editing stage, where he tries to make sense of the material collected:

I thought, 'Okay, I'm going to film on a street corner, and I'll use a 400 foot roll of film, and I'll film what happens on the street and then I'll direct it later.' (...) Afterwards I sat down with the film and worked out the instructions that I was going to give. (...) I did go off to a field in the middle of nowhere, and shouted into a microphone a script I had written directing all those things (...). The street sound that you hear is the sync sound of the street. There's an alarm bell ringing throughout the film, which I found every annoying at the time, but I just had to shoot in then. (...) So I shot all those accidental things into the scenario, because I'm fascinated by accidents.[42]

The idea of shooting a street corner and directing it came from Truffaut's *La Nuit américaine* (Day for Night, 1973),

which has to do with a film within a film. (...) Also the passers-by are directed. (...) When I saw Truffaut's film it had never occurred to me that the people in the background in Hollywood films were directed.[43]

From this point of view the idea behind *The Girl Chewing Gum* deals with the appropriation of reality as an experimental ground. There is an interesting fracture between the unawareness of the people filmed and the filmmaker's intentions. His aim is also underlined by the presence of a cinema on the

right side of the street corner, framed several times with people queuing outside: '[t]he cinema appearing in the shot becomes a reference to this imaginary space that the audience are occupying.'^[44] In the 2011 version the Odeon cinema disappears:

[c]inema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes the silent film more perfectly than the original, etc.: all of this is logical, the cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a *lost referent*.^[45]



Fig. 3: John Smith, *The Man Phoning Mum*, 2011, still. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

Akerman's orchestration of reality is also mostly emerging through cinematic choices. In *News From Home* one can distinguish two locations: indoors and outdoors. Visions of open streets in New York City make up the majority of sequences, though there is also room for some scenes in the underground. In the first case scouting and selection of places, streets, views is conducted within an intimate psychogeography^[46] that maps remembrances and delivers them back almost as postcards (to the mother, to the viewer):

[i]t's probably the places I knew the best. When I came here in '71, I had no money, so I walked a lot.^[47]

The indoors is represented by the subway sequences, shot onboard trains as well as in stations. Akerman's thoughtful analysis of her film highlights the staged feature as well as the spontaneous, daily character of *News From Home*:

[i]t's like Dante, but organized! And also because when (...) you have all those platforms, you have many layers, and trains arriving emptying; you see people. *In one shot, you have the world.* It's also like a stage, the 42nd Street stop, even though it's reality. One thing empties and one person appears, behind a column; *it's a scene. In a way it's a documentary, but staged, like a choreographed thing.*[48]



Fig. 4: Chantal Akerman, *News from Home*, 1976. Still. Courtesy of CINEMATEK / Royal Belgian Film Archive and the artist.

Perhaps the method with which Akerman could organise the confusion of the urban environment for the eye of the attentive spectator is through an 'excess of time', since 'extended duration (...) is undoubtedly the signifier par excellence of the realist impulse'.[49] Bruno notes how in her cinema

cities, lands, and homes are portrayed in long takes that enhance duration, capturing the unfolding of everyday life, especially the life of women, and the flow of temporality and memory. (...) In this durational way, we are given the opportunity to *reflect*.^[50]

2. *Remakes of the self*

It is precisely this tension to *reflect* – both in the sense of the viewer's intellectual meditation and of a surface throwing back light and images – that may help understand the hyperrealistic density of *News From Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum*. The process both authors went through while physically and mentally returning to the origins of their work can be labeled as *remake of the self*, offering the viewer a reality that is not only staged but also increased. A very direct example is the overlapping and subsequent versions of the same shot in *The Man Phoning Mum*. The thick texture of the film still allows the viewer to observe how that street corner has changed over 30 years (and how it has not). The temporal shift is marked by the use of two different recording media: first 16 mm black-and-white film, then colour HD video. A similar mixture of formats is present in Eric Baudelaire's *The Anabasis of Masao Adachi, Fusako and May Shinegobu and 27 years without images* (2011). Baudelaire's documentary follows the story of the Japanese director Masao Adachi, who was involved in the Japanese Red Army active in Lebanon in the 1970s. During his stay in Beirut, Adachi collected a huge amount of footage which was lost after his arrest in Japan. Part of the documentary is the re-shooting of the same footage by Baudelaire, accurately instructed by Adachi. Baudelaire films in Super 8 as the Japanese filmmaker did; the use of such an obsolete format to record contemporary scenarios creates the same sense of surplus and loss at work in *The Man Phoning Mum*.

I got interested in the fact that it had been remade already. I thought, 'I know exactly where my camera was, I can go and re-do it myself.' I liked the remote possibility that one of the people in the original film might still live in the area and might walk in front of the camera, so that in the new video they would confront their younger self when the 1976 and 2011 footage was superimposed.[51]

In *The Man Phoning Mum* the merging of different technologies underlines the chronological distance, creating a sort of alienated proximity, and thus 'hyperreality is attained through a fake impression of depth, the excess of detail resulting from a fixed stare'.[52] Margulies' reading of Akerman's work as hyperreal is hence relevant also in relation to Smith's work. Since the two authors are dealing with the re-production of an original, the impression of reality is actually staged and increased – it produces hyperrealism, 'understood as a cinematic translation of the effect of distance that results when a picture or sculpture reproduces a subject which is already an image'.[53] In *News From Home* two sequences in particular are experienced as hyperrealistic: one shot on the subway train and the closing scene shot

onboard the Staten Island ferry. The former is a medium close-up of the doors opening and closing at the stations, the latter a wide shot of New York's skyline. Where the viewer would expect to see the reflection of Akerman filming on the window panels of the subway, nothing can be seen except anonymous passengers. The last sequence produces the same feeling of supposed profundity – the metropolis' profile becoming smaller and smaller in the shot's width, almost granting 'the feeling that the city is sinking'.^[54] The scenes have no voice-over and are situated at the antipodes of the film (end vs. beginning), marking its narrative extremes (arrival vs. departure); the duration is perceived as extended, within the single sequences and throughout the whole film, and oscillates between 'the representational and the literal registers'.^[55] Akerman's and Smith's works both 'involve a corporeal dimension: insisting on and amplifying the referential aspect of representation, they constantly remind the viewer of physical, material presences – of cinema, of the actor/performer, of the spectator'.^[56]

Conclusion

As suggested above, *News From Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum* both suggest the act of *reflection* – of the spectator, who is made aware of the cinematic language, and of the filmic surface, considered in the light of Bruno's understanding of it as 'the material configuration of the relation between subjects and with objects, (...) viewed as site of mediation and projection'.^[57] Drawing from Akerman's autoethnographic practice that blurs the boundaries between author/subject/viewer, as well as from Smith's structuralist approach aimed at revealing filmic grammar, we are presented with a hyperreal cinematic experience. In this sense the notion of the remake functions as another 'augmentation tool' that extends such experience beyond the mere action of watching the films. As mentioned earlier, the remake presupposes the idea of an aware audience, trained to understand cinematic history and intertextuality (hence the 'reflection of the spectator') – but most importantly, because to read *News From Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum* as *remakes of the self* as *remakes of reality/of the self* allows us to recognise that 'the emphasis on surface details intimates an estrangement, an excess—one sees more than one needs to in order to "read" the image'.^[58] Watching both films, the viewer does not stop at the threshold of the screen; the relationship between spectator and artistic work is played out through the spec-

tator's *immersion* within the cinematic material. Bearing in mind also Akerman's installations, Bruno writes:

[h]er itinerant way of filming appears especially suited to the peripatetic mode of reception that exists in the art gallery, where visitors wander in space, interacting with screens that enhance not only displacement but also forms of encounter and liminality. Whether in cinema or installation form, the fabric of the screen always functions in Akerman's work as a porous material that mediates an intense *sense of projection*: a relationship between inside and outside, physical and mental space.[59]

Such a sense of projection is also part of Smith's filmmaking, since 'the primary relationship of every movie is one not between characters but between the screen and the audience'.[60] The continuous exchange and negotiation between the viewer and the filmic surface, while 'defamiliarising and "making strange" the familiar',[61] is exactly where the hyperrealistic experience of *The Man Phoning Mum* takes place. I thus want to argue that *News From Home* and *The Man Phoning Mum* offer examples of reality perceived as expanded or deeper because they are products of a performance which is at once actual and staged, containing elements of spontaneity related to the pictured subjects and elements of self-awareness towards the means of reproduction of those subjects. In the form of remakes the two films present images of hyperrealities where the viewer can recognise the terms of a self-referential abundance as well as their realistic core.

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Notes

- [1] Verevis 2006, p. 1.
- [2] 'Film remaking depends, too, "on the existence of audience activity", not only prior knowledge of previous texts and intertextual relationships, but an understanding of broader generic structures and categories.' Ibid., p. 2.
- [3] Russell 1999, p. 276.
- [4] Clifford 1988, p. 9.
- [5] Koresky 2010.
- [6] Gidal 1976, p. 1.
- [7] Balsom 2015.
- [8] Eberwein in Horton & McDougal, 1998, p. 30.
- [9] Martin 1979, p. 30 (emphasis added).
- [10] Horton & McDougal 1998, p. 4.
- [11] Nichols 1994, p. x.
- [12] Horton & McDougal 1998, p. 4.
- [13] The present essay considers mainly the English version. For a background on both versions and screening issues in relation to the audience see Roberts 2014.
- [14] Boym 2001, p. 44 (emphasis added).
- [15] Ibid., p. 49.
- [16] Although Smith often involves his biographical/artistic persona. Examples include: *unusual Red cardigan* (2011), which recounts the filmmaker's self-awareness about his presence on the internet (he finds an Ebay offer for a DVD collection of his work and establishes contacts with the seller and therefore new considerations upon his work's reception); *Home Suite* (1993-4), which uses physical details of the artist's house to trigger descriptions of associated remembrances.
- [17] Martin 1979, p. 30 (emphasis added).
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Also to bearing in mind that her mother's native language is not Belgian but Yiddish. Akerman's heritage is Polish, French, Hebrew, and Yiddish, and therefore the process of reading and translating underlines the state of 'group affiliation and disaffiliation' also at work in *News From Home*. For the discussion regarding Akerman's use of language see Morra 2007, pp. 91-108.
- [21] Boym 2001, p. 49.
- [22] Nichols 1994, p. 24.
- [23] Danks 2003.
- [24] Frye 2013.

- [25] Pucill 2013.
- [26] Russell 1999, p. 280.
- [27] Pratt 1992, p. 533.
- [28] Anderson 2010.
- [29] Frye 2013.
- [30] Danks 2003.
- [31] Smith, 1998. During an interview on the occasion of his retrospective held at the RCA in London, Smith expressed his sympathy with the 'finding subject-matter close to home' approach that informs Akerman's and Varda's work: '[i]f you look for things you find them. That's the kind of philosophy that runs through a lot of my work.' Bradshaw 2010.
- [32] Margulies 1996, p. 49.
- [33] Herbert in Leighton & Meyer 2013, p. 8.
- [34] Danks 2003.
- [35] As the filmmaker stated: 'I'm interested in making work that lots of people – including people who are completely uninformed about avant-garde cinema – would be interested in seeing. So to me, the accessibility that humour creates is an important part of the work.' Frye 2013.
- [36] Interesting to observe is the use of 'pre-written' texts and Akerman's predilection for the epistolary form; among the essential conversations held between the protagonist and the teenage son is the reading of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Enemies* and the letter of a relative living in Canada.
- [37] Martin 1979, p. 41.
- [38] Margulies 1996, p. 22.
- [39] Snow is no stranger to the practice of the remake: in 2003 he made the ironic *WVLNT (Wave-length For Those Who Don't Have the Time)*.
- [40] Margulies 1996, p. 52.
- [41] Bruno 2015.
- [42] Frye 2013.
- [43] Ibid.
- [44] Ibid.
- [45] Baudrillard 1995, p. 47 (emphasis added).
- [46] Wasielewski 2008.
- [47] Anderson 2015.
- [48] Ibid (emphasis added).
- [49] Margulies 1996, p. 23.
- [50] Bruno 2015 (emphasis added).
- [51] Balsom & Smith & Wright 2015.
- [52] Margulies 1996, p. 46.
- [53] Ibid.
- [54] Anderson 2015.
- [55] Margulies 1996, p. 45.

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- [56] Ibid., p. 47.
- [57] Bruno 2014, p. 3.
- [58] Margulies, p. 47.
- [59] Bruno 2015 (emphasis added).
- [60] Beckett 2011.
- [61] Christie in Leyghton & Meyer 2013, p. 50.