

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

*A Woman's Medium*

By Amy Taubin (January 23, 2009)



Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, 1975, stills from a color film in 35 mm, 201 minutes.  
Left and right: Jeanne Dielman (Delphine Seyrig).

When Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) debuted in the US in 1976 (a one-off at MoMA), few noted that the twenty-five-year-old filmmaker was precisely the age of Orson Welles when he made *Citizen Kane* (1941). More than three decades later, the coincidence figures prominently in many of the pieces heralding the film's one-week revival (January 23–29), in a pristinely restored print, at Film Forum, where it had its first New York run in 1983. There is no better shorthand tactic for making you, dear reader, feel the urgency of getting your head out of your Netflix queue and running to the theater to see *Jeanne Dielman* than to invoke the sacred Kane.

Indeed, both films are not merely masterpieces but also landmark works, which by conjoining the radical achievements of their respective moments—not only in cinema but in the novel, the theater, the visual arts—reinvented cinematic language to become paradigm shifters, both aesthetically and politically. *Jeanne Dielman*, which counts among its influences Ozu, Bresson, Godard, Warhol, Michael Snow, the Hollywood genre of “the woman's picture,” the French nouveau roman of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute, the postmodern dance of Yvonne Rainer, and just about everything in the Minimalist visual-art canon, in turn has inspired thirty years of what is termed “observational fiction cinema.” Among the American filmmakers who found the film revelatory: Gus Van Sant, Todd Haynes, and Jim Jarmusch.

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Jeanne Dielman describes forty-nine hours (stretched over three consecutive days—from midafternoon on the first to midafternoon on the third) in the life of the title character (Delphine Seyrig), a widow who lives in almost total isolation, save for a teenage son with whom she barely speaks, in the middle of Brussels, Akerman's native city. Her time is organized ritualistically around housework—cooking, scrubbing, dusting, making beds, shopping for groceries—and many instances of these activities are shown in real time, as they would be in an ethnographic film. One way to describe Jeanne Dielman is as an ethnography of the kitchen crossed with classical tragedy. Every afternoon, in precisely the time it takes to boil the potatoes for dinner, Jeanne takes one of several regular gentlemen callers into her bedroom, where she exchanges sex for money.

The film is split squarely down the middle of its nearly three-and-a-half-hour running time. The first half, the exposition, begins with the arrival of the first john and ends with the departure of the second. (What happens in the bedroom on these two occasions is unseen.) In the second half, Jeanne's obsessively structured routine begins to go awry; the mistakes, droppages, and leakages signal a failure of the psychic mechanisms of compartmentalization and repression she has employed to keep what Akerman once referred to as "the problem of being" at bay. When the repressed returns, it is in an act of terrible violence, as shocking as it is inevitable.



Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (detail), 1975, still from a color film in 35 mm, 201 minutes. Sylvain Dielman and Jeanne Dielman (Jan Decorte and Delphine Seyrig).

A portrait film in the most radical sense, *Jeanne Dielman* dispenses entirely with two of the most basic tropes of film language—the point-of-view shot and the reverse-angle edit. The entire work is filmed with a somewhat wide-angle lens on a fixed camera, positioned, almost without exception,

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frontally and slightly below what is considered eye level. The point of view is undisguisedly that of the filmmaker—just as the point of view of a painting is unmistakably that of the painter—regarding her subject, Jeanne, who is almost always centered in the frame. The choice of lens is crucial: It makes us feel as if we are inside the space of Jeanne’s apartment—with its drably patterned wallpapers and draperies, its fussily positioned knickknacks, its yellow-tiled kitchen walls and black-and-white kitchen floor—and yet the absence of close-ups keeps us at a distance. We are allowed to observe this woman and perhaps identify somewhat, if not with her, then at least with the anxiety and rage she tries so desperately to keep in check. But, again, because of the subjacent angle and the absence of close-ups, we never feel as if we have power over her or superior knowledge of her experience. Indeed, the film is structured as much around information to which we are denied access as it is around that which is easily observable. In contrast to the extended duration of individual shots, the editing patterns are abrupt and elliptical. The edits are meant to shut us out, but they also, like Jeanne’s compulsion to turn off the lights when she leaves one room for another, evoke the psychic compartmentalization that is essential for her survival.

Without a doubt, this is a film by a brilliantly talented artist with a rigorous intellect, a formal sophistication, and an emotional empathy astounding for someone her age. But it also involved an extraordinary collaboration among three women: Akerman, the cinematographer Babette Mangolte, and the actor Delphine Seyrig, who represses every trace of the sensuousness that made her a star, taking on the frozen mask, the rigid bearing, and the anesthetized gestures that Akerman borrowed from her memories of her own mother.

Jeanne Dielman is one of the first films I reviewed, and it is the only film in thirty-plus years of writing about movies that I was dead wrong about. The mixed review, which ran in the SoHo Weekly News below the unfortunate head “A Woman’s Tedium,” is a painful memory. I ascribe my blindness and misreading to my identification of Jeanne with my own mother and my inability to reconcile the character’s final horrific but life-changing act with anything my mother would do. I apologize. Jeanne Dielman is the mother of us all.

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