

She's Come Undone: Chantal Akerman's Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) and Countercinema

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In a 1972 article, “Womens’ Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” Claire Johnston argues that realistic cinematic depictions of women only serve mainstream, bourgeois, patriarchal ideology. For a cinematic image of women to be radical it must “challenge the depiction of reality . . . [not simply] . . . discuss oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of cinema . . . must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected” (215). The emphasis on formalist intervention also characterizes Peter Wollen’s 1972 piece, “Godard and Countercinema: *Vent d’Est*,” with its seven interconnected formal characteristics of radical political cinema.¹

Johnson’s criteria are certainly sympathetic to some feminisms—predating Laura Mulvey on visual pleasure by three years—but her definition of countercinema need not be specifically feminist. Similar to those films which Comolli and Narboni see as having both “political form and political content,” a film which “effects a break” between ideology and text need not restrict itself to, nor ally itself with, any specific ideology. While *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) can be (and was) read as a feminist film, it can also and simultaneously be seen as countercinematic, and in ways that complicate and conflict with, yet still allow, feminist readings.

Much of the contemporaneous writing on Akerman’s film asked to what degree the film was feminist (sympathetic to womens’ struggles against oppression). The locus for these readings was the penultimate scene of the film, where Jeanne, both housewife and prostitute, stabs a man with scissors. In the three hours prior to this, we have watched Jeanne wash dishes, clean house, make meals, bathe, and go about a rigorous daily routine, which includes daily visits from men (we only see the final encounter; the camera does not enter the bedroom for the first two visits). Reviews from feminist critics were mixed: Johnston argued that the film reflected an “eruption of jouissance” against phallic (and cinematic)

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¹Countercinema tends to be understood, following Wollen’s essay, as referring to a heterogeneous, self-reflexive, Brechtian film aesthetic, paradigmatically evident in the late sixties work of Godard. Ivone Margulies, while avoiding the word ‘countercinema,’ describes Akerman’s aesthetic as “post-Godardian” in its minimalist homogeneity—not because it supercedes Godard’s work but because it is “a reassessment of the axiomatic equation of politicized art with certain formal and rhetorical strategies” (58). My reading of *Jeanne Dielman* centers on Johnston’s definition of countercinematic practice, which is sympathetic to that of Wollen (1972) and of Comolli/Narboni (1969); nevertheless, it does not intend to privilege Johnston as giving the accurate definition of countercinema.

language, while Jayne Loader argued that the film had a “male” narrative structure of “tension, climax, release” (326–28). To speak about the film as countercinema, my reading will first investigate the topic of Jeanne’s subjectivity (a question essential to most feminist readings) and will then employ Foucault’s notion of “surveillance” to argue that *Jeanne Dielman* “effects a break” between ideology and text.

One of the most immediately noticeable characteristics of the film is its reliance on cinematic minimalism, manifested as long takes and medium shots. Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig) is almost always in the frame, but wanders in and out, and the camera often begins and ends a shot in darkness as Jeanne turns lights on and off. Nearly all of the film (except for a night stroll and morning errands) occurs in Jeanne’s flat, and the vast majority of the film is given to housework: in this we see two elements common in Akerman’s work—space and gesture.² Ivone Margulies labels Akerman’s aesthetic “hyperrealism” and describes *Jeanne Dielman* as “wavering between the naturalistic and symbolic registers” (92). Everything that we see in the film—up to the murder scene—is, while fictional/symbolic, also naturalistic: when Jeanne washes dishes, Delphine Seyrig washes dishes. The actress and the role are parallel, occupying the same space, committing the same gestures.

Despite this naturalism, critics found the film’s content highly political, arguing that it shows the alienation implicit in housework, or that it validated housewives as part of the labor force, or that Jeanne’s routine drove her mad and caused her “eruption” at the film’s end.³ Loader makes the case that Jeanne has internalized the housewife role, and further argues that “Akerman’s controlled, formal style perfectly mirrors the inner feelings of her character” (330). The rhetorical move made by Loader is to make an analogy between formalist minimalism and what Marsha Kinder calls Jeanne’s “meaningless social rituals” (2). A certain existentialism is called for if we assume that formal minimalism is linked to Jeanne’s interiority; the character gains a ‘minimal’ subjectivity.

The difficulty of attributing subjectivity to a character whom we know so thoroughly externally is worked out in an essay by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis. In “What’s beneath her smile?” Flitterman-Lewis argues that *Jeanne Dielman* is the story of jouissance turned to murderous revolt (the essay is named after debates over whether or not Jeanne experiences orgasms with her second and third client, and whether this causes or is related to her murdering the third man). As to subjectivity, the author quotes Akerman on the film’s refusal of shot-reverse-shot (“It’s not shot from the point of view of the son because the son is not a camera”) and of voyeurism (“You always know *who* is looking . . . it wasn’t shot through the keyhole” [emphasis in original]) to raise the question of the “organizing gaze,” that behind the camera (32–3).

Flitterman-Lewis posits a “feminine subjectivity” precisely in that the viewer does not know what Jeanne is thinking. This argument can be seen as deriving from Laura Mulvey’s idea that the cinematic apparatus serves patriarchal ideology: if the apparatus serves patriarchy, then to not represent Jeanne’s interiority is to potentially delineate a space for that interiority; its invisibility (to patriarchal representation) provides for its existence. After establishing Akerman’s direction and eye behind the camera, along with the film’s

²Many of Akerman’s films seem to give great attention to either gesture, space or both (see *Saute Ma Ville* (1968), *Hotel Monterey* (1972), *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974), *News from Home* (1977), *Les Rendezvous d’Anna* (1978), and *J’ai Faim J’ai Froid* (1984)). Where there is containment, gesture within space feels claustrophobic; where there is transition, spaces seem grand and alien. All of the above films can be seen as operating within roughly these two characterizations.

³See, respectively, Kinder, “Reflections on ‘Jeanne Dielman,’” the first section of Loader, “Death in Installments,” and Flitterman-Lewis, “What’s Behind her Smile?” although it should be noted that many feminist critics find it necessary to wrestle with the jouissance/murder question.

disabling of commercial (read: male, voyeuristic) filming styles, Flitterman-Lewis argues that “the viewer’s contemplation is unavoidable” and that therefore the polyvalence of the murder sequence reflects a multiple, fluid (and sexualized, and feminine) subjectivity.

The essay is honest about these commitments: “in order to discuss the film’s meaning at all, one has to consider female sexuality as a term of meaning” (36). Having proved that *Jeanne Dielman* disables a certain mode of objectifying female sexuality, Flitterman-Lewis follows up with an assumption: since Jeanne is not an object, and her sexuality does have meaning, what does her sexuality mean? What *kind of subject* is she? The essay concludes on the polyvalence of this female subjectivity, accounting for readings of Jeanne as violated, as revolutionary, as subversive, and/or as colonized by patriarchy. Based in an “unstable, uncontainable” libidinal notion of female subjectivity, Flitterman-Lewis’ reading concludes that Akerman has “inverted the terms of identification, or invented new ones” (38). However, a question not taken up in the essay is that Jeanne may also not be a subject at all.

In three different interviews, Akerman variously refuses to attribute any sort of interiority to Jeanne Dielman:

“I don’t know about her psyche . . . she doesn’t exist.”⁴

“You will never know what is happening in her head and in her heart.

I don’t know either. It’s not Jeanne Dielman’s secret, it’s Delphine’s secret.”⁵

Akerman ties this anti-psychology to representation in an interview with “Cahiers du Cinema”:

“Cahiers: There is the painting by Magritte that represents an apple and has ‘this is not an apple’ written underneath.

Chantal Akerman: Yes, but it’s what Magritte is always on about. It’s not an apple, but even so, it refers to an apple, it represents an apple and it means: apple. And that’s not new, it relates to a time (at the beginning of photography and the cinema) when people had difficulty distinguishing between reality and its representation. That goes on even now. There are a lot of people who ask me . . . if this woman Jeanne Dielman really existed. I answer them with Magritte, but at the same time this woman on the screen refers to a woman . . .”⁶

In one sense, this is obvious, because all characters in film are ideological representations, and not “real” people. However, in *Jeanne Dielman*, where the actress and role are paralleled in the naturalistic representation of housework, negating interiority for the title character leaves only the actress, the space, the gestures, and the camera crew. Further, the film’s most fictive moment (the murder, which is obviously not “real” but which is still registered in the same minimalist camera style) both breaks the naturalist “spell” of the film’s first three hours and seems desperately to need interiority so as to become comprehensible (unless, after Flitterman-Lewis, one sees this ambiguity as positive; the film certainly does allow the various readings given in that essay).⁷

⁴Cited in Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday*, 217, note 16.

⁵Cited in Margulies, 232, note 76.

⁶Cited in Martin, “Chantal Akerman’s Films: A Dossier,” 38.

⁷Some saw the murder scene as a sell-out to Hollywood-style drama: Jonas Mekas, on seeing the film, asked why Akerman had “commercialized it” by including the murder. From Margulies, 241, note 54.

By refusing any unspoken psychological “secret” or even the existence of an individual woman named Jeanne Dielman, but at the same time claiming that the character “represents, refers to and means: woman,” Akerman argues that the film is not about a individual character, nor even about a housewife “type,” but literally about woman’s gestures and space. The full title of the film, which includes the character’s address, reiterates the importance of the space. However, the film is still more complicated: before *Jeanne Dielman*, Delphine Seyrig had accumulated a significant art film resume, including *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and Marguerite Duras’ film version of *India Song* (1975). Casting Seyrig as the “everywoman” housewife works against the anonymity inherent in such a role, and also against the naturalistic parallels between Seyrig and the role—we see not simply “a woman” but an art film star doing housework. Combined with the fictive murder and Akerman’s denial of the character’s interiority, and reinforced by the minimalist camera style, Seyrig’s presence insures that *Jeanne Dielman* cannot be simply a prescriptive film about “feminist jouissance and revolt.”⁸

Jeanne Dielman is an intentionally conflicted film: it shows perhaps the most typical and under-represented of female roles, but with a star in that position; its minimalism seems to show ‘reality,’ but the fictive murder works against this; its reliance on real time and obsessive focus on the main character is accomplished by a rigorously externalizing, anti-psychological camera style. The film is neither a purely descriptive documentary nor a cleanly prescriptive polemic. However, *Jeanne Dielman* can be seen as “effecting a break,” specifically between its diegesis and its cinematic style. Following Loader and Flitterman-Lewis, who see the camera style as linked to Jeanne’s diegetic routine (paralleling her static lifestyle and positing an unspoken subjectivity, respectively), this reading sees both Jeanne Dielman and Chantal Akerman as engaged in surveillance (a term borrowed from Foucault). Jeanne’s failed maintenance of her daily routine in her private space is captured in long takes and medium shots by Akerman’s minimalist, static camera; it is the vision of Jeanne’s failure to properly surveil herself where the film becomes self-reflexive and critical—by means of a “surveilling” camera—of the whole project of surveillance.

Surveiller is rendered as “discipline” in the English title of Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish*. Writing on the development of “disciplines” in the eighteenth century, Foucault defines them as “methods . . . which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (137). Jeanne is both docile and effective, in keeping house: her role as housewife, even in the absence of a husband, is her utility. Loader writes that “it is the housework that sticks in one’s mind after the film is over and the housework that provides Jeanne’s identity” (329). Her space, which makes up the latter half of the film’s title, is also a site of discipline—just as we know Jeanne through her gestures and they reveal her to be a housewife, her domestic space reflects, requires and reinforces this role. Foucault writes that “discipline . . . requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony [emphasis in original]” (141). Akerman’s film shows Jeanne repeating her daily cycle three times, and while the routine crumbles as the film progresses, its prior monotony is clearly evident. The camera acknowledges no change in affect between peeling potatoes, making

⁸This paragraph is heavily indebted to—and is a very brief summary of—a compelling and in-depth argument made about the film by Ivone Margulies, particularly in chapters 3 and 5 of *Nothing Happens*.

the bed, or welcoming a john; this even extends to the murder sequence. Jeanne's gestures consistently strive to maintain her disciplined routine, even when that routine breaks down.

Akerman also carefully closes off avenues to Jeanne's interiority; beyond her outright denials above, the director makes certain that Jeanne is never anything more than an external surface (literally, the image of a woman: *ceci n'est pas une femme*). It is important to notice that Jeanne Dielman is not typical in her roles; she is neither essentially a housewife nor a woman. Because we know her only by gesture and space, and because she is "performed" by Delphine Seyrig, Jeanne's gestures are not even naturalistic representations of "womens' work": they are gestures created by the actress. Following Marx, one wonders if this repetition of so many womens' historical gestures is tragedy or farce. To watch this film is not to see "a woman at home"; it is to see an internalized, disciplined set of gestures repeated until the governing routine fails.⁹

Jeanne's relationships to sex and family are similar to her relationship to her space. Just as home must be maintained because that is where a housewife has her utility, Jeanne maintains a chilled, repressive idea of family and sexuality. Her role as prostitute even serves to make money which she later gives to her son; what might be a subversion of the family, here serves to reproduce normative relations. In the same way that the film treats all events with equally low affect, Jeanne acknowledge no difference between housework and prostitution; her interiority and external space are both so well disciplined that no leakage can occur.¹⁰

Even though Jeanne has sex with three men, Akerman's film is tremendously effective at containing questions about Jeanne's/womens' sexuality (until the murder sequence). Jeanne's husband is dead and she does not date; she also defuses her only encounter with the Oedipal complex, in the second of her evening conversations with her son Sylvain. Sylvain relates a dream where "daddy was using his penis like a sword, to set mommy on fire," and says that he wanted to protect her. Jeanne tells him simply, "You shouldn't have worried." In an earlier conversation, Jeanne had told Sylvain that "making love is only a detail."

This repression lends itself to "eruptive jouissance" readings of the murder scene, but in a 1977 interview, Akerman recasts the "orgasm debate":

"... this was her one strength, the space she had kept for herself. The fact that she was frigid was almost a protection of the one place where she was not alienated. It's supposed to be the opposite but... if so many women are frigid, it's because they feel deep inside that that will be the last point of alienation. So, if an orgasm happened with that man, it's because she had weakened... First the ritual is imposed on you. And after that, it's the ritual that keeps you going because otherwise... You know what I mean? So, in fact, it's having

⁹Akerman has repeatedly said that the film shows these gestures because they are not often shown, and that this is why the film can be said to be feminist (see Martin, 24). At one point she even says that *Jeanne Dielman* is a love song to her mother. Without going as far as intentional fallacy, there is evidence that Akerman herself finds housework distasteful at best: from *Saute Ma Ville* (1968) to *Jeanne Dielman*, housework is combined with disaster (alternately played comically and tragically). In Akerman's later films, women are in transition (*Les Rendezvous d'Anna* (1978), *J'ai Faim J'ai Froid* (1984)) and are not located in "their own" domestic space.

¹⁰It is possible—given that Akerman acknowledges Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* as a primary influence—that the idea for Jeanne's prostitution grew from the same *Nouvel Observateur* articles from which Godard took a central idea for *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1966). Housewives were turning to prostitution to make money for appliances (basically, to "keep up with the Joneses"). For those pieces, see Margulies, 239, n. 18.

that orgasm that's the first acte manqué. And then it's a series of actes manqués after that because she is not strong enough to keep up those barriers between herself and her unconscious anymore. When she asks her son to come home for an afternoon snack, it's because she's afraid to have it happen again. And then she may be thinking that she can kill the effect by killing the cause. But in fact, the cause is herself because somehow she let the thing happen. But it's not so conscious, so premeditated."¹¹

Jeanne accepts frigidity—"You shouldn't have worried"—as part of family life, one of many roles she then maintains with rigorous circumspection. In the same way that prostitution helps to maintain her routine rather than being a racy "vacation" from it, Jeanne has accepted, and now come to rely on, frigidity as part of her family role with Sylvain. Frigidity and prostitution are part of her routine, her discipline. In stark contrast with classical Hollywood definitions of character and narrative, where psychologically motivated characters move in cause-and-effect-driven stories, Jeanne's exteriority reveals the maintenance of routine, a drive toward stasis. The latter half of the film is the story of change erupting into Jeanne's routines, but an unconscious, inexplicable change, manifesting itself as a series of mistakes—burned potatoes, bad coffee, a murdered John.

Why is the murder necessary? It is this sequence which potentially calls into question the naturalism of the prior three hours, the scene which most desperately invites speculation about Jeanne's interiority, and it leads to the ambiguous ending of the film, Jeanne sitting silently for nearly seven minutes. Ivone Margulies describes the scene as the "inability of the character's obsessive compulsion to paste over an unco-optable alterity—the arbitrary senselessness of the murder scene" (97). While my reading substitutes Foucauldian "surveillance" for "obsessive compulsion," I agree with Margulies that Jeanne cannot repeat or "make right" the murder scene. Unlike the burned potatoes, Jeanne cannot either re-do or un-do the physical fact of the murder, and this unco-optable failure of Jeanne's self-surveillance is the reason for the murder scene.

Of course, because it presents a woman, sex and death, the murder scene can be read not just in terms of feminism but any cinematic and/or social libidinal economies (surrealism and film noir come to mind). Akerman's cinematic practice, however, must be considered in any reading of this scene; rather than being a source of polyvalence or frustration, the exteriority with which Jeanne is presented to us is essential to showing how her routine undoes itself even as it maintains itself. The murder of the John is accomplished in three shots: one of Jeanne undressing by the mirror, a second, from above, of her under the man, where she has an orgasm, and then the third, in the same composition as the first, where in the mirror we see her, armed with scissors, fall on the man's throat; she then replaces the scissors on the bureau. There is no music, no change in either shot distance or pace of editing, and no blood, struggle or gratuitous display; this scene is filmed with the same quotidian "hyperrealism" used when the static camera films Jeanne making meatloaf for several minutes. The murder, which is the most dramatic (and permanent) evidence of Jeanne's routinism-gone-mad, is still contained within the minimalist style which has been so well-suited to Jeanne's earlier, more disciplined first day, and the murder is committed *as if it belonged to that routine*.

As Jeanne commits more actes manqués, the film editing does change slightly; for example, the angle from which she is shot in the kitchen moves ninety degrees. Yet overall,

¹¹Quoted in Martin, 42–3. Martin translates 'acte manqué' as 'mistake' but also notes that it comes from Freud and has "officially been translated as parapraxis," which means "Freudian slip."

the camera does not change strategies. Throughout the film, and with the exception of the ceiling-mounted shot in the murder sequence, Akerman shoots in medium shot and long take; the camera registers, rather than responds to, Jeanne's increasing difficulty maintaining her routine. Akerman has said that, "in other films they make a woman-object without confessing; I made a woman-object but . . . consciously".¹² The minimalist style is anti-depth and anti-psychology, making it nearly impossible to access Jeanne's subjectivity, but "woman-object" sounds like part of a Mulvey-style polemic against Hollywood. Akerman "consciously objectifies" Jeanne not with Mulvey's always-male cinematic apparatus, but because Jeanne is literally the studied object of the camera; she is in virtually every shot of the three-hour film.

Akerman claims that the film is feminist not because of the murder but because "[it gives] space to things which were never, almost never, shown that way, like the daily gestures of a woman" (Martin, 24). *Jeanne Dielman* represents those actions that many movies would elide. It is noteworthy that Akerman does not talk about feminism in terms of subject/object; again, it is the representation of gestures that is feminist, not the character herself. Akerman's study of Jeanne is necessarily an objectifying one, even though the elision of early sex scenes and the quotidian content of the film disable what Mulvey calls the "fetishistic" tendencies of Hollywood cinema. The objectification of Jeanne by Akerman's camera does not mitigate the film's feminism; rather, it foregrounds the failure of Jeanne's "surveillance" by itself surveilling that failure.

When Akerman says "woman-object," she does not mean that Jeanne is an exploited woman in a fetishizing, sexualizing patriarchal cinema. Akerman's choice of hyperrealism as an aesthetic, along with the quotidian content of the film, simultaneously disables this cinema while it makes Jeanne Dielman and her space into an object, like a specimen on a microscope slide. The camera's "surveillance" of Jeanne is not a making-docile, a Foucauldian power play; instead, the camera, which shows Jeanne to us precisely in those most private and inconsequential moments which are left out of most films, serves a Panopticon-like function. The Panopticon was a nineteenth-century prison innovation, where prisoners could be potentially constantly surveilled from a tower by unseen persons—a sort of one-way mirror of disciplinary observation (Foucault, 200).

The spectators of *Jeanne Dielman* surveil Jeanne in this way, watching her without being able to be seen. Whereas the Panopticon served to discipline prisoners, however, Jeanne cannot respond to spectators because she is an image, "not a woman." Instead, and because the diegesis is already loaded with surveillance (in fact the film is about Jeanne's self-surveillance, her making-herself-docile), spectators watch the progressive degeneration of Jeanne's own surveillance. In this respect, the panoptical camerawork shows the failure of the very project surveillance is supposed to secure. According to this reading, the murder scene is necessary because it makes indisputably certain the failure of Jeanne's docility, and it does so without requiring access to Jeanne's subjectivity. All that is required for this project, "surveillance viewing its own failure," is that the camera panoptically and flatly films the diegetic failure of the "making-docile" project. It is far more important *that* Jeanne kills than that we know *why* she kills.¹³

¹²Cited in Margulies, 241, n. 49.

¹³Margulies cites Akerman as saying, "When she bangs the glass on the table and you think the milk might spill, that's as dramatic as the murder" (65). Few viewers are likely to grant Akerman this. In Margulies' reading, the 'actes manqués' are equivalent: tousled hair is as good as murder. The murder, in my reading, is in the film to make irrevocably clear that Jeanne's routine has failed—to show what Margulies calls "unco-optable alterity." The murder is the proof of the entire routine's irrationality.

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles is countercinematic not primarily because it interrogates the representation of reality (although it does), but because its aesthetic of representation shows the failure of a mode of discipline of which it should instead guarantee the success. Akerman's hyperrealism is too much an excess of reality—a feminist display of those daily gestures so often elided—to fetishize the actress, but the fictiveness of the star and the murder are too present to let the film seem to be a naturalist documentary. This “wavering between the naturalistic and the symbolic,” reinforced by the anti-psychological filming, makes Jeanne neither an individual nor an essentialized type. Instead of “a woman,” the film shows private gestures and private space, which are given hyperbolic presence by the minimalist and omnipresent camera style. *Jeanne Dielman* presents—more than represents—to us the disciplining and disciplined gestures of a gendered role under contemporary capitalism, and it also presents, with the same rigorous, surveilling cinematography, the unco-optable failure of that project. It is the hyperreality guaranteed by Akerman's filming style that makes the fragmentation of ideological “docility” inescapably present.

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