

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles: Transcript

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles is a film about prostitution, a film about sex, and a film about violence. It depicts on screen a fatal stabbing and a female orgasm (I'll let you decide which one of those two events might be more controversial in the history of cinema) and so why, in spite of the inclusion of such racy, dramatic plot points, is the experience of watching it so claustrophobic, so stifling, so uncomfortable? What might this say about our expectations of the cinema? What might this say about the expectation that films must *entertain* the viewer and deliver a good dose of visual and narrative pleasure?

I'm here to talk today about the Belgian-born, female director Chantal Akerman's 1975 film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. It's a long title, for a long work - exactly 225 minutes, or 3 and 3/4 hours in length - which takes as its subject the everyday domestic life of a Brussels housewife, also called Jeanne Dielman, who, in the hours that her live-in son attends classes at a local university, receives male clients in her upstairs bedroom as a prostitute.

To take the film's name as a starting point illustrates to what extent this is a work interested primarily in *space*. Jeanne Dielman is not just Jeanne Dielman: she is Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, defined and circumscribed by her small, dreary apartment (where the vast majority of the film's scenes are set): a prisoner of housework and of the claustrophobic terrors of routine. But this is exactly, I want to suggest to you, Chantal Akerman's radical cinematic contribution: granting us unprecedented access to an *underrepresented*, and prior to the film's release, barely ever registered on camera, space: the space of an ordinary, working class home, the space of a widow and perhaps most importantly, the space of a woman a whole world away from Hollywood's and what we

might broadly term 'commercial cinema's' preference for exotic, escapist locations, exceptional events, and a 'male,' action-heavy way of seeing the world.

In an interview with the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* outlining her aims behind the film, Akerman stated how:

Above all I wanted to work on language by taking images which, in the cinema in general, tend to get elided and are the most devalued. Because there is a hierarchy in images. For example, a car accident or a kiss in close-up, that's higher in the hierarchy than washing up. Washing up is the lowest, especially from behind. And it's not by accident, but relates to the place of woman in the social hierarchy. Moreover, if I had shown Jeanne Dielman making love with the two clients, a close-up of her mouth and the perspiration when she washes up, her curved back etc. - I could have made the audience cry, but I would have been working with traditional cinema.

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, is rather an example of *alternative* cinema – a cinema refusing to subscribe to typical filmic conventions.

In an essay first published in 1973, or two years before the release of *Jeanne Dielman* the film scholar Laura Mulvey pointed out how we assume and take for granted the idea that watching film should be a pleasurable experience, and that cinema should fundamentally, be 'pleasing to the eye.' We expect, on entering a cinema or sitting down to watch a DVD, in other words, to be invited into a world, to be welcomed, to be honoured guests. And yet, Akerman's film immediately subverts such expectations.

The opening shot breaks all the rules by showing Jeanne with her back to the audience, engaging not with the camera but with the mundane chore of the nightly washing up. We cannot see her face, or her expression. Such a posture creates a near physical barrier between the film and the spectator: tells us to keep out. Yet, far from diminishing such an activity,

the long take and extended duration of the camera suggests the viewer should watch patiently, should be attentive and *respect* such a chore. Such a technique is adhered to for the whole length of the feature which is noticeably absent of any close-up shots, with Akerman, filming always from the same fixed vantage point, preferring to keep a certain formal and respectful distance from her lead character. Such a choice, we might suggest, becomes political: refusing to eroticise or fetishise the female form - refusing to isolate body parts such as Jeanne's face, mouth, breasts or legs so that she appears in full: as a person, and not as a collection of appealing images.

Despite such techniques, it would be difficult to venture *Jeanne Dielman* as a straightforward feminist film. On the one hand, the work seems a definite product of cultural, social and political influences, coinciding with the 1970s women's movement in France and abroad, and echoing video art pieces such as Martha Rosier's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* which, in a short 15 minute film, sought to expose the hidden, patriarchal structures at work in the average domestic space. In interviews, however, Akerman has resisted the feminist label, saying, in one striking quotation from 1979, that 'I'm not making women's films... I'm making Chantal Akerman's films.' Such a statement, despite later films such as *Je tu il elle*, revolutionary at the time for its uncensored representation of lesbian sexuality, seems to align her filmmaking less with feminist film than with the 'auteur' tradition in France epitomised by directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais, and geared towards subjective, singular expression - a particular individual's cinematic, artistic vision of the world - rather than collective, political change.

It seems hardly a coincidence, then, that Akerman frequently cites the influence of Godard on her work. At the age of 15 she was reported to have seen his coming-of-age classic, *Pierrot le Fou*, in the cinema, and decided on the spot to become a filmmaker, joining other

Francophone female auteurs such as Agnès Varda, often nicknamed the ‘grandma’ of the French New Wave, Claire Denis and Catherine Breillat.

This focus on the structural rather than the personal also extends to the relationships depicted in the film. Used to seeing intimate exchanges as a means of making money, a means of financial compensation, Jeanne, Akerman suggests, is unable to see any of her ensuing relationships in less than clinical, transactional terms. Despite diligently caring for her son, for example, cooking dinner for him every night, waking early to prepare his breakfast and to shine his shoes before he leaves for class, the sense we get is that this is more of a chore than a connection - a means of killing time between client appointments - rather than a means of actual engagement. At the dinner table, for example, conversations are stilted and awkward, with Sylvain - the son’s name - even taking out a book at one point in the middle of the meal, putting his mother physically and symbolically at one remove, establishing a further ‘screen’ between them.

On the whole, Sylvain seems content with this functional arrangement, and yet a key scene in the middle of the film marks a change in the dynamic. About to go to bed, reading a book, he barely responds when his mother comes in to kiss him tonight. Upon her comment that by reading all the time, he is ‘exactly like his father,’ nonetheless, he attempts to involve his mother in an actual conversation, asking her about the marriage, how they met, even probing for intimate details about their sex life. For the most part, Jeanne refuses to be drawn, telling her son that it does him no favours to talk about such things, yet at the same time, her reluctance emphasises the extent to which she strives to keep her relationships – even the primary maternal bond – compartmentalised and on her own, strictly bounded, terms. Such strictness and emotional coldness is mirrored in the scene’s fixity of camera stance, in its refusal to come close to its filmed subjects. Akerman suggests that this approach is not sustainable, however. In a long and controversial monologue in which Sylvain reveals that as

a child, he interpreted his mother's cries and moans in the midst of intercourse in the main marital bedroom as cries of *pain* and proof of his father's desire to kill and hurt Jeanne, we see the latter's visible discomfort. Whilst indeed, her son lounges on the bed in a comfortable position, she stands up tensely, folding her arms across her chest and refusing to make eye contact.

Taking the philosophy and thought of the famous German psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, an undeniably strong influence on Akerman, as model, here Sylvain's fears sync neatly with the concept of the 'oedipus complex,' or the idea that sons are in automatic competition with their fathers for the mother's affection, and feel jealousy, anger and fear at the latter's dominance in the family hub. The complexity of Akerman's film's sexual and gender politics comes further to the fore when Sylvain questions how any woman could make love with someone 'ugly.' But aesthetics, beauty and visual pleasure are minor things to Jeanne. 'Making love is just a detail,' she responds - 'faire l'amour n'est qu'un détail,' again revealing her talent for compartmentalising, her ability to separate sex from love. 'If I was a woman, it would be different,' Sylvain counters. 'But you are not a woman' – *Mais tu n'es pas une femme* – Jeanne fires back, in perhaps one of the most crucial lines, demonstrating the extent to which Akerman is determined to be faithful to specific *feminine* experience of the whole film.

Not that there are many lines at all. As I said before, most of the film occurs in silence as the viewer is subjected to the excruciatingly repetitive nature of Jeanne's daily chores. Very little editing occurs, so we almost experience such labours - the making of dinner, beds, and the scrubbing out of baths - in real-time. Although the film is structured in three parts, corresponding to three days in Jeanne's existence - Day 1, Day 2 and Day 3 - the segments blur into one hazy mass. The only marks of differentiation happen on Day 2, when Jeanne's obsessively choreographed routine falls prey to error. The shift appears to happen after

Jeanne has seen that afternoon's client. Although we are not made witness to the encounter, Jeanne emerges following the *rendez-vous* as obviously flustered and disturbed, her hair noticeably out of place, setting in motion a gradual spiraling into chaos which will culminate in the film's dramatic denouement or climax (which I will expand on shortly.) Following this meeting, everything, indeed starts to go wrong. From overcooking the potatoes so that the precise chronology of dinner is disrupted to waking up too early the next morning putting her at a loss as how to best kill the gained time, Akerman paves the way for the ultimate 'Freudian slip': Jeanne's experiencing of an orgasm with a client on Day 3, an oversight which in the usual clinical, highly formal context of her client meetings, she would never normally allow.

The disruption is so monumental that it leads to Jeanne's eventual stabbing of the client in question whilst he lounges in post-coital bliss. In contrast to her prior policy of obscuring the film's sex scenes, here Akerman allows us full, uninterrupted access to the encounter: from the moment of Jeanne's unintended orgasm to the moment when she takes a pair of sewing scissors from her nightstand and pierces them through the client's heart. Although Akerman seems on the whole *against* the idea of 'character motivation' the moment lends itself to several, potentially conflicting interpretations. On the one hand, we might say that Jeanne is punishing herself for surrendering to pleasure; that really, she means to inflict the violence on *herself* for straying so catastrophically out of line. A more feminist interpretation would paint the gesture as an act of political revolt, however: as an expression of frustration and rebellion against an oppressive patriarchal order and against an unjustly male way of viewing and directing being in the world.

So is the murder active or reactive, political or personal? Such a question Akerman means to leave open. The film, indeed, ends in ambiguity. Rather than witnessing the messy aftermath of the murder, or its resulting consequences, the feature fades out on a long, ten minute shot

of Jeanne, covered in blood, sitting calmly at her downstairs dining room table. The sense, somewhat perversely, is that through such a dramatic act Jeanne has found relief, has somehow managed to *escape* the manic obligations of domestic life and of routine. And yet, as befits most of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, the conclusion Akerman draws is not straightforward. Although the final scene is registered mostly without sound, a faint, low-level sound of traffic coming from the street outside can intermittently be heard and a pulsing light - possibly reflected from a siren - be seen to flicker ominously over Jeanne's face, suggesting that the scrutiny and judgment of the outside world is, despite the apparent peacefulness of the moment, not far off.

In conclusion, *Jeanne Dielman* is a complex and demanding film, a film toying with its feminist and political allegiances; a film which sets up an uncomfortable relationship between its narrative and our expectations as spectators. But should watching film be a comfortable experience? Whatever the answer, the full title of the film, as well as setting out a highly defined space, seems to demand correspondence from the viewer, also works as an *address*. In this sense, *Jeanne Dielman 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, becomes not just the story of a specific woman in an individual Brussels apartment, but an invitation to engage with our own everyday lives, our own routines, and our own methods of madness.