

Sample Research Essay

Mad [Wo]Men: Deconstruction of the Housewife in *Jeanne Dielman*

Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (hereafter *Jeanne Dielman*) is a study of 48 hours in the life of a Brussels housewife. The audience follows Jeanne throughout her routine, her domestic actions shown in real-time and in their entirety. The film is marveled as a feminist work, praised for giving space to images ignored in mainstream cinema. Akerman, however, reveals through cinematic elements that as Jeanne performs this characteristically feminine labor, she becomes less the subject of her environment and more of an object embedded within it, reflective of the oppressive ideologies of gendered labor that views women as inseparable from the home. Within the confines of Jeanne's world, Akerman constructs the disciplined gestures of a gendered role under the patriarchy, while simultaneously deconstructing it with its failures as Jeanne's routine breaks down, culminating in the murder of one of her clients.

Jeanne is not your typical housewife. In fact, she is not a *housewife* at all, but a widow. Traditionally, the maintenance of the home revolves around the husband, and it seems strange to have the protagonist in a film about gendered labor lack this quality. Jeanne's son Sylvain certainly acts as a surrogate husband to some degree. The scenes of them sitting down to dinner play on a classic trope seen throughout TV and cinema of a "traditional" husband and wife: the husband comes home from work (in Sylvain's case,

school), the wife has timed dinner with his arrival. They eat together, the wife cleans up, and perhaps the husband reads a book or a newspaper before they go to bed (Fig. 1).



Figure. 1, *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). Jeanne and Sylvain eat dinner

In any case, however, Sylvain is not Jeanne's husband. Therefore, what is the point in maintaining the ordered routine characteristic of a housewife without a husband present? Akerman deliberately posits this question, suggesting that such a routine is so performed that it continues even when the function appears absent. The housewife becomes an identity in and of itself, insisting that it is more tied to the home and female gender than it is to any man in question, and that that man need not necessarily be a husband. Furthermore, through Jeanne's performance of her daily tasks, she suggests that her identity as a housewife is indivisible from her own.

Jeanne's role as a housewife demands an existence that revolves around, as the name suggests, the home. From her housework to her afternoon prostitution, the majority of Jeanne's labor is performed in her apartment. Her outings are necessitated only by the need to maintain her home and perfectly manicured routine: she buys the food to cook for dinner, she pays the bills, and she buys another ball of yarn. The other elements of her work, her prostitution and daily babysitting stint, are also noticeably gendered and visibly isolating. As Jeanne's environment continues to determine her actions, she becomes subject to an ideology that portrays women as inseparable from the home, and therefore,

necessarily privatized. In Hannah Arendt's "The Human Condition," she discusses the distinction between the public sphere of men's work and the private sphere of female labor. Women, she notes, share a lot of historical overlap with slaves, both as private beings that should be kept hidden, "not only because they were somebody else's property but because their life was "laborious," devoted to bodily functions" (Arendt 72). Jeanne's work is a response to her femaleness—the exploitation of her sexuality for money, her duty of maternal care, the maintenance of an orderly home—and in response to her work, she is seen as less than human by the society in which she is imbricated. In this sense, Jeanne's isolation becomes far more systematic than her not getting out much. She is not only isolated, but also privatized like property, like an object.

The film's use of framing, temporality, and other cinematic techniques allow the audience to see Jeanne as an object. Akerman captures Jeanne's actions in medium-long shot, and she holds the frame as Jeanne moves through and beyond the field of vision. Her labor is captured in real time, with no cut until the next action begins in another room. The film gives space to these images imposed and concurrently devalued by patriarchal culture. However, in this sense, Jeanne is not the focal point of the viewer's attention. She is no more emphasized than the meatloaf she is making, and therefore we do not separate her from the other elements in the frame (Huser 17). On the first day, as Jeanne sets the table for dinner, the camera does not follow her as she goes back to the kitchen to fetch the glasses (Fig. 2). The camera maintains its gaze on the table, giving the placement of the utensils more emphasis than Jeanne. In the second image, it looks like she has merely been inserted into the frame, and therefore, is not the center of our attention.



Figure 2, *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). Jeanne leaves the dining room, and returns to finish setting the table.

It seems counterintuitive to present a protagonist in a feminist film as lacking autonomy, nevertheless, Jeanne seems to exhibit two contradictory tendencies: “She is the primary character in a story...and she is somebody whose actions appear determined by mechanical repetition” (Huser 17). It is through this lens that what Brian Huser calls “intersubjectivity” between spectator and image emerges (19). The extended duration of each shot “gives the elements of a domestic space a presence exceeding what is necessary for us to merely see and contextualize them” (19). In other words, the frame becomes so familiar to us that we become a part of Jeanne’s environment. In this way, the separateness between viewer and Jeanne’s environment disappears. Akerman wants the audience to see Jeanne as a patriarchal society sees her: as an object, as a part of her routine, not the one acting autonomously on her surroundings. Akerman creates this world for Jeanne. There is no husband for whom this mechanical routine is maintained, yet it is maintained nonetheless. Whether Jeanne is a willing participant or otherwise, this image of Jeanne is necessary to capture the film’s rising tension.

The cinematic techniques that emphasize Jeanne’s mechanical repetition are implemented not to show an image of a happy housewife, but to show Jeanne’s breakdown under a suffocating ideology. The intersubjectivity we share with Jeanne and her environment primes us to notice the slightest discrepancy. Jeanne ritualistically turns

off the lights after leaving a room, she places the money from her clients in a pot on the dining room table and replaces the lid, and she gets up every morning and puts on her robe, doing every button. Despite having only seen her perform these actions once, the long takes and repetitive frames instill themselves into our memory. We can imagine that this scene has been played a thousand times before. Therefore, when Jeanne forgets to replace the lid after putting the second client's money inside, we notice. Akerman uses moments that seem insignificant when removed from the context of the film, yet build suspense as Jeanne's perfectly ordered routine continues to deteriorate. She forgets to turn off the lights, she misses a button, she overcooks the potatoes, and eventually she commits a murder.

When the murder occurs, however, it is shown to be no more significant than the rest of Jeanne's actions. When the third client arrives, we see for the first time what has been kept off-screen. Jeanne's eyes squeeze shut, she grips at the pillow, she sighs—she orgasms with her client. Jeanne gets dressed, buttons her shirt and tucks it into her skirt, picks up a pair of scissors, and stabs the man. The “climax” is downplayed, given no more attention than the act of dressing. The audience isn't even shown the mirror directly, but through the reflection in the mirror of Jeanne's vanity. The man dies with a grunt, which is no more noticeable than the sounds of Jeanne kneading the meatloaf. Akerman herself comments, “when she bangs the glass on the table and you think the milk might spill, that's as dramatic as the murder” (Kinsman 223). Patrick Kinsman describes these stylistic choices as countercinematic. By giving space to modes of domestic work that are largely ignored in mainstream cinema, Akerman is able to

simultaneously bring value to the image of the housewife and deconstruct it with its failures (224).

The murder is the most obvious indication that Jeanne's routine has failed, and along with it, the idea that fulfilling the image of the housewife should lead to happiness. Jeanne's thoughts are never expressed; the motivation for the murder will never truly be understood. However, due to the film's previous tensions and subsequent murder, one can infer that Jeanne is incredibly unhappy with her role, and given the option, would probably not be selling her body to satisfy old men. The representation of Jeanne "shows the failure of a mode of discipline of which it should instead guarantee the success" (Kinsman 224). By taking a composed housewife and juxtaposing her with committing a murder, Akerman becomes what Sara Ahmed would call a "Feminist Killjoy." Whether tired of pretending to be satisfied or having just become conscious of her own unhappiness, Jeanne defies the notion that feminine labor leads to joy. The image of the happy housewife, according to Ahmed, is a social construct designed to keep women subservient to men:

The happy housewife is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness. The claim that women are happy and that this happiness is behind the work they do functions to justify gendered forms of labor, not as a product of nature, law, or duty, but as an expression of a collective wish or desire. How better to justify an unequal distribution of labor than to say that such labor makes people happy? (50)

This is fitting, considering those that Jeanne works for are all men (her son, her clients, even the boy she babysits). Again, the film illuminates that one can be a housewife without a husband present, as Jeanne's routine is still maintained to serve men, her physical and emotional labor entirely devoted to their happiness. If housework does not make Jeanne happy, then making men happy doesn't either. There is the odd exception.

Note her slight yet warm smile when she hears Sylvain come home on the first day (Fig. 3). This is one of the only instances of potential genuine motivation for her routine: providing for her son.



Figure 3, *Jeanne Dielman* (1975). Jeanne smiles when she hears Sylvain come home.

Given the murder, however, the happiness her son brings her is not enough. *Jeanne Dielman*, situated within the 1970s feminist movement, captures the themes of the feminist killjoys of the Western world. Furthermore, by not revealing her thoughts, Akerman is able to bring a sense of universality to Jeanne's story. By placing Jeanne in this universal context, the film adopts a politicized stance: that the immobility of society and the repression of women keeps Jeanne locked in a patriarchal order, and that this order is detrimental to Jeanne, and by extension, for all women trapped in this view.

Jeanne Dielman by Chantal Akerman is a film about nothing and everything. The majority films three and a half hours are plagued by the monotony and mechanical repetition of feminine labor performed by the film's namesake. Yet, it is the entire lived experience of a housewife. Akerman uses stylistic techniques to construct a world for her protagonist in which she is entirely dependent on her surroundings, and portrays Jeanne as little more than an object. In this way, Akerman is able to deconstruct her world as Jeanne's routine breaks down, illuminating the failures of a society that confines woman's work to the private sphere and the identity of the housewife. By maintaining the

audience's ignorance about Jeanne's motivation for the murder, Akerman allows Jeanne to become a universal figure of the unhappy housewife, calling attention to an inherently flawed system. Jeanne sits at the dining table in the dark after killing her client, simply existing, breathing, a neon light striking her face, blood staining her clothes. Perhaps she regrets what she's done; perhaps she feels a sense of release and relief. Whatever her thoughts, Akerman's message is clear: there's only so much time a person can stay trapped before they long to be freed, and there's got to be another way out.

Works Cited

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