

MA Illustration

Isabelle Weaver-Jones

2406273

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Research Question. Research and critically evaluate the work of either one or two artists/designers/makers in the context of the Deconstruction of Human identity. Employ critical analysis and relevant theoretical perspectives to evaluate the examples that you choose.

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"In what ways does Chantal Akerman reimagine and critique the domestic space through a feminist lens in *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), and how does this film challenge traditional representations of women's labour and agency within this context?"



Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975): Director Chantal Akerman

Thesis statement

Chantal Akerman shifts the male gaze and creates a visceral performance through minimalistic and artistic cinematic techniques in her film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Setting the president for nuanced feminist film and realistic portrayals of woman's role, agency and labour, exposing and subverting traditional patriarchal structures in cinema.

Abstract

This essay explores Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* in alignment with its context of Feminist film theory, specifically second-wave feminism. Through the use of deconstruction of the human identity of feminist film theory, this essay draws on the perspective theories. These include the male gaze (Laura Mulvey), Gender performativity (Judith Butler), construction of woman's identity (Simone de Beauvoir), feminist theory and semiotics (Teresa de Lauretis), and psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud).

Akerman's time-based film *Jeanne Dielman* embodies the reality of an oppressed and complex woman, a role often ignored in mainstream cinema. Evoking a visceral experience when watching, acknowledging and analysing the key feminist aesthetics that made Chantal Akerman's film a poignant piece of artwork. Dissecting the elements in how she reimagined and critiqued the domestic space in cinema through the feminist lens and how it challenges traditional representations of women's labour and agency even still today.

Introduction

Through analysis of Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) this essay will explore how Akerman addresses and critiques female gender roles and labour in the domestic space through a feminist lens. Dissecting how she challenges patriarchal norms in her unconventional style of cinematography. *Jeanne Dielman* offers profound and meticulous critiques of women's labour and oppressive agency that unravel and expose the patriarchal structures embedded within their respective contexts. Jeanne's agency as a mother, housewife, and sex worker appears constrained, however, is regained at the end of the film, thus Akerman's questions traditional representations of women's roles as housewives in cinema.

The emergence of Feminist Film Theory in the 1970s, alongside second-wave feminism, allowed for critical perspectives and analysis of women's portrayal in cinema. Akerman does this through, challenging and opposing the patriarchal constitutions that have historically shaped societal norms and a woman's place in society. This theoretical approach scrutinises how films either subvert or maintain traditional gendered roles, and portrayal of women, through the film's narrative, character development, and visual connotations.

The dominant concern of feminist film theory is the critique of *gendered spaces, roles, labour* and the confinement of women's *agency* in cinema. Akerman's cinematography and narrative around the female protagonist Jeanne Dielman literally and symbolically highlights all explicitly through a feminist lens. Considered an influential piece of feminist work by second-wave feminists, *Jeanne Dielman* demonstrates the oppression of domestic labour, portraying the invisibility of the female protagonist, bringing a housewife's and prostitutes' reality to the forefront of the camera.

This essay will analyse Akerman's nuanced style of cinematography in order of silence and sound, time, shot and mise-en-scene. All of which reimagines the domestic space, psychological toll representing the drudgery of labour and repressive routine of domestic and sex work. Concluding, with an analysis of how these cinematic techniques have been forged to subvert traditional representations of women in films. Additionally, examining the significance of *Jeanne Dielman* in alignment with the context of feminist film theory. Akerman's minimalist aesthetics, narrative, and direction create an atmosphere that parallels Jeanne's unconscious. Highlighting the oppression and struggle under the patriarchal system shared with the underlying narrative of resilience challenging societal norms of women's roles.

Additionally discussing and analysing the minimal but effective forms of cinematography of prolonged shots, frontal framing, simplistic mise-en-scene, and minimal yet hyper-realistic audio, subtly connotes the representation of female oppression and repression in the domestic sphere. According to Kinder “Akerman's unconventional style of cinema expresses a feminine perspective and sensibility” (Kinder, 1977). Not only allows the viewer an intimate look into the true toil and oppression of the lives of housewives, women, and mothers but also allows them to feel and experience the lives they are living, from a female perspective.

Context and Theorist Perspectives

Feminist Film Theory

Annabelle Hirsch highlights the irony in asserting that "an unspoken rule applied in the world of cinema: a woman should be seen, and not the one seeing" (Hirsch, 2024). This statement critically contrasts the historical fact that the first filmmaker to create and produce a fictional narrative for the screen was a woman; Alice Guy, whose 1896 film *La Fée aux Choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*) (Figure 1) marked a pioneering moment in cinematic history, whom success prompted her to have control of Gaumont films (Hirsch, 2024).



Alice Guy's 1896 film *La Fée aux Choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*) (Figure 1)

With this in consideration, the social movement of feminism did not arise until the late nineteenth century in response to the inequalities of women in the United Kingdom and the United States, known as First wave feminism (Block, 2010).

Feminist Film Theory evolved simultaneously with Second Wave Feminism, addressing social, economic, and political inequalities that prohibited women from the same opportunities as men in all aspects of society. This awareness of the reality of a woman's existence is uniquely reflected within *Jeanne Dielman*, with her seminal narrative.

The emergence of second wave feminism allowed feminist film making one example being the *Semiotics of the Kitchen* released in 1975 by the female director Martha Rosler, who aggressively parodied a cooking show, using kitchen utensils, representative of weapons of female rage and critique of women's roles in society (Bras, 2019). However, none more powerful than Jeanne Dielman with her nuanced unconventional style of cinematography.

Jeanne Dielman's powerful message has influenced other artists and directors such as Gus Van Sant's film *Last Days*, which took cues from Jeanne Dielman's capture of everyday life, existential themes, and long shots, ending with a violent climax (Bowen, 2018). Proving significance as an pinnacle marker during its time and for the future of cinema.

Laura Mulvey: The Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's pioneering of the Male Gaze was pivotal in critiquing and exposing classic Hollywood cinema's patriarchal structures. Explored within cinema are narratives, gender roles, and spaces, alongside the male gaze, acknowledging the medium's inherent voyeuristic tendencies.

Mulvey theory on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is an essential part of feminist film theory. By examining and critiquing Hollywood films' depiction of women as objects of male desire, catering to the perspective of the male viewer (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey argues that most often the protagonist in classical Hollywood films is male, with the narrative complimenting his desires. (Neroni, 2016) (Mulvey, 1975).

Theorist Claire Johnston in "*Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema (1973)*" argues alongside Mulvey that images of women in film do not reflect the realities of women's lives but instead, each character embodies a patriarchal fantasy about women (Johnston, 1973). Thus, according to the theorist Judith Mayne, a multitude of critical literature written by feminist film critics since has been a reaction to Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze (Rabinowitz, P. 1990.) (Mayne, J. 1985). Solidifying her as a pivotal figure in feminist film theory, helping to shape the

field. Chantal Akerman exquisitely challenges and subverts this narrative of the male gaze by the camera following the existence of the female protagonist of *Jeanne*, however, still conveys connotations of oppression and cultural narrative, through the feminist lens.

Gender Performativity

Teresa de Lauretis theories in *“Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema”*, expands on Mulvey's male gaze that explores the narrative on gendered spaces and critiques how the traditional narrative in cinema sustains dominant patriarchal ideologies. Teresa advocates for narratives that challenge and disrupt this “Akerman's film addresses the spectator as female” (De Lauretis, T, 1984). Chantal Akerman achieves this by successfully subverting the classic narrative through her unconventional style. Bringing attention to the immanent nature of the existence of a housewife and highlighting its mundanity and monotony with an unexpected ending of a murder (De Lauretis, T, 1984).

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the woman as ‘Other’ from *“The Second Sex (1949)”* of oppression and gender expectation of domesticity within marriage is somewhat outdated (Mayne, 1985). However, according to author Andrea Veltman, Beauvoir's theory is still relevant to the feminist critique of the domestic space:

“Beauvoir's distinction between transcendence and immanence can function to critique not only marriages in which women are wives by occupation but also those in which employed wives perform the majority of everyday household labour” (Veltman, 2004).

This statement highlights the repressive lifestyle women conform to. Feminist theorists and critics have recognised that the connotations of roles and behaviours of men and women in cinema, which are viewed as natural characteristics and dispositions, have been shaped by cultural beliefs (Neroni, 2016). Jeanne Dielman acts as an exquisite example of this critique. Her acknowledgment of a woman's reality is powerfully conveyed through her direction, alongside Delphine Seyrig's performance in Jeanne Dielman.

Judith Butler's poststructuralist feminists' argument and theory “Masculine and Feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed” (Butler, 1990) reiterates the idea of gender being a performance of repeated behaviours and actions that create the illusion of an identity (Butler, 1990). Her studies of this gender performativity under the patriarchy, is mirrored in Akerman's subtle connotations of oppression through domestic activities.

Psychoanalysis

Jeanne Dielman is a homage to Akerman's mother, caged by domestic society, however, can also be interpreted through a psychoanalytic lens as well as a feminist one.

"While Jeanne Dielman can be (and was) read as a feminist film, it can also and simultaneously be seen as counter cinematic, and in ways that complicate and conflict with, yet still allow feminist readings" (Kinsman, 2007, p. 217) (Carruthers, 2023).

Freudian and Lacanian concepts previously explored and critiqued by Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* asserts that a woman "symbolizes the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and thereby raises her child into the symbolic" (Mulvey, 1975).

Acknowledging the depiction of women lacking, and castration threat allows for constructions such as voyeurism to prevail in cinema, therefore, neutralising the threat and reinforcing male power and control. Aiding the emergence of patriarchal structures and the male gaze in cinema. (Mulvey, 1975) (Mayne, 1985). In addition exploring Freud's Oedipus complex is explored through Sylvian, Jeanne's son and his jealous nature of his father's relationship with his mother (Carruthers, 2023).

Akerman echoes these theories and critiques of domestic oppression, psychoanalysis, gender, and the male gaze, challenging and reimagining them using nuanced cinematic techniques of sight, sound, and repetition.

Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*: Analysis

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, 1975 is revolutionary in its narrative approach, that profoundly portrays the role, isolation, agency, and labour of a woman through a feminist lens. Presenting a meticulous portrayal of a widowed housewife that spans over three days. By focusing on the time-consuming trivialities of a middle-class woman, single mother, and sex worker, Akerman subverts and challenges convention and traditional narratives not represented in mainstream cinema at the time. Through the use of slow pace, static shots, deliberate visuals, and framing, in addition to limited dialogue, highlighting her habitual routine Akerman is able to portray Jeanne's hidden psychological and emotional strain. Specifically bringing forefront the expectations of women societally and domestically embodied by Jeanne. This provoking critique and discussion amongst feminists and theorists. *Jeanne Dielman* is an acknowledgment of the underappreciated role and domestic expectation of a woman and mother (Fowler, 2021).

“Jeanne Dielman accomplishes something that very few other films have managed: it makes the housewife and mother seen” (Fowler, 2021).

Akerman’s direction draws our attention to the overlooked ordinary woman in the domestic space outlining the effect of the Brussels bourgeoisie patriarchal system occurring in Brussels in the 1970s (BFI, 2022) (Kuhn, 1976). Akerman’s direction of *Jeanne Dielman* allows for prevalent feminist critique, however a “contrary of feminist classics” with its ambivalent nature of housewife and mother (Fowler, 2021).

Silence and Sound

Jeanne Dielman is an exquisite example of using sound as a form of dialogue. Although Akerman states “I won’t say I’m a feminist film-maker . . . I’m not making women’s films, I’m making Chantal Akerman’s films” (Mulvey, 1979). *Jeanne Dielman* displays micropolitics of feminism within the film, achieved through minimalist techniques, firstly silence and sound.

Eugenie Brinkema’s *Critique of Silence* (2011):

“For silence, the centrality of the language of being leads to the fantasy of being’s elimination; by contrast, near inaudibility is linked to a violence that imprints its force on and as an effect of tension and duration in form.” (Brinkema, Eugenie, 2011)

Akerman’s nature of near inaudibility throughout the film allows for the audience to feel the tension and pressure building in Jeanne’s mind and unconscious (Brinkema, Eugenie, 2011). The minimalist technique of silence has become a vital art of feminist aesthetics and can be said to act as a tool for illustrating what it is to exist as a woman (Artt, 2024). Due to the minimal dialogue, the viewer does not have easy access to her thoughts, emotions, and intentions. This profound quietness in which Jeanne exists allows for a rhythmic form of communication created by the sound of her habitual domestic chores. Her daily routine on days one and two establishes a rhythm that acts as the dialogue and counters the silence. You can “hear the sound of time taking place” (Talijan, n.d). This minimalistic nuanced style of cinema radically connotes an oppressed housewife whose unconscious beneath her perfect exterior exhibits her underlying truth of a repressed sex worker and demise in composure and sanity (Talijan, n.d).

The repetitive nature and level of audio of the meat kneading scene (Figure 2) increases the emotional impact and heightens tension indicating the beginning of Jeanne’s psychological demise and control. She is beginning to unravel. The prolonged silence during this scene

alongside the peeling potatoes scene creates more anxiety and tension than the scene of the murder. During these domestic scenes (Figure 2 and 6) it is heavily implied that she has experienced a traumatic moment and is at a loss of control, amplified through the silence (Bras, 2019).



Building tension: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) (Figure 2)

Although Akerman's use of silence is key to feminist aesthetics and narrative, the minimal dialogue in the reading of the aunt's letter remains valuable, in providing insight into Jeanne's past and in the implication of her domesticated existence under the patriarchal system. In the letter the Aunt suggests to Jeanne "A good-looking woman shouldn't be alone" and signs off the letter with "Jack's coming home and the table is not set" (Figure 3) Suggesting insight into the patriarchal oppression both Jeanne and her Aunt are experiencing.



Aunts Letter (Figure 3)

Akerman puts Jeanne's domesticity at the forefront of focus and importance throughout the film, by the audio levels remaining consistent regardless of situation, such as the volume of the elevator, the kneading of meat, polishing shoes, and the sex scene, to the sound of her stabbing.

Time

Although Gilles Deleuze's concept of time-images; realistic representations of time in images and his concept of repetition was theorised after Jeanne Dielman. These theories are now recognised in her work during Jeanne's habitual routine and repetitive chores in real-time durations, that allude to deeper meanings (Deleuze, 1989).

Akerman states "I want the spectator to feel...the time used in each shot; to make this a physical experience in which time unfolds in you, in which the time of the film enters into you." (McBane, 2016) (Pursley, 2005).

The significance of time in the film is vital to the narrative and is a feminist aesthetic (Lau, 2021). Jeanne Dielman fits into the category of slow cinema (Barrington, 2024), a time-based film that is dependent on rhythm. Akerman shoots her scenes in a specific way and durations to bestow attention on the domestic life of Jeanne Dielman (Bras, 2019).

Each hour of the film is representative of a day, each day, a new sex work client arrives. At the beginning there is no obvious reference to time, we hear no ticking clock, just the rhythm of her structured routine, domestic chores, and punctual manner. On day two, after the client visits,

we see Jeanne's compromised punctuality, becoming unorganised and dishevelled. Her bodily rhythm which at first acted as a metronome, now appears to be disturbed. We can begin to hear the clock ticking and spoiling the potatoes indicative of her loss of control. When the metronome is disrupted, it gives the audience a sense of her psychological demise (White, 2017).

Akerman brings significance to the passing of time, and mundanity of domestic life, in the coffee-filtering scene (Figure 4). The scene is symbolically reminiscent of an hourglass and is significant in representing the long duration and patience of domestic life. Jeanne is metaphorically "pouring out time itself" (White, 2017) (Margulies, 1996). The full-frontal static shot, silence, and prolonged duration of this scene, build suspense and are visceral, allowing the audience to experience the feelings of a housewife; patience, oppression, and the passage of time. Thus subverting traditional representations of women by shifting from the male to the female gaze, reframing the narrative perspective with a focus on a woman's subjectivity not objectivity (Tobin Power, 2023). She is not objectified but instead gazed at with compassion and understanding. This perspective and gaze allow the audience to see the struggles as broader societal issues and not just isolated character struggles (Mayne, 1990).



"Pouring out time itself" (Patricia White, 2017) (Margulies). (Figure 4)

The duration and unconventional style of Akerman's 223 shots, were specifically and carefully constructed to convey the film's narrative making the invisible visible (Ivone Margulies, 1996) (Patricia, white).

Akerman's statement "I do think it's a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images. A kiss or a car crash comes higher.... It is because these are women's gestures that they count for so little" (Akerman, 1977).

Akerman's shots display no hierarchy. Each image of domestic chores is centred and equal in audio volume and duration, bringing importance and attention to the reality of a housewife's and woman's existence. The peeling potatoes and meat kneading scenes both three minutes in duration, equal the penultimate scene (the sex scene). All of which are longer than the murder scene, only one minute in duration (Figures 5,6,7). Therefore, Akerman gives more screen time to the domestic activities in the film, except for the seven-minute-long ultimate post-murder scene (Talijan, n.d).



Potato peeling scene, duration three minutes (Figure 5)



Sex scene, duration three minutes (Figure 6)



Murder scene, duration one minute (Figure 7)

Shots and Mise-en-Scene



image of domesticity and oppression (Figure 8)

The Spatiality of *Jeanne Dielman* is vital in portraying Jeanne's character and challenging the traditional role and agency of women in cinema. Very minimal is portrayed of Jeanne in the mise-en-scene of each shot, leaving her character complex and the viewer enticed to only project themselves onto her empathetically (Remoortre, 2022). Although the character is complex, the framing of shots embodies the domesticated housewife, and “what it is to be a woman” (Jenny Charmett, 2013) (Figure, 8). More specifically, a certain type of European woman, trapped by the societal norms of the bourgeois system, who lived by the patriarchal structures. The expectation of women to manage the domestic role in the household; “the clockwork mechanism of bourgeois femininity” transpired due to post-war beliefs of maintaining a stabilised middle-class lifestyle, regardless of the movement of second-wave feminism occurring simultaneously (Charmett, 2013).

Simone de Beauvoir's feminist perspective “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Smith & Bruce, 2016) (De Beauvoir, 1949) explores the attributes of femininity, gender roles, and oppression emerging due to culture rather than nature (Neroni, 2016). Jeanne's oppressive habituality of domestic routine overpowers any indication of her character and personality throughout the film, as she maintains the perfect illusion of a housewife.

However, Akerman further into the film invites the audience to see elements of Jeanne's unconscious and aspects of her true reality. Shown in the bath scene after her client, the

washing of herself is as meticulous as her household chores, indicating ritual ablution, (Figure 9) washing away the prostitution (White, 2017) fuelling the concept of her hiding the illusion of her reality.



Ritual ablution (Figure 9)

Additionally, Jeanne continues to hide her reality from her son. Akerman displays the concept of the Oedipus gaze from her son Sylvan, as he displays jealousy of his father (Mulvey, 1975). However, "Your hair's a mess" (Figure 10) said by Sylvan indicates his acceptance and understanding of his mother's sexual situation, even though Jeanne continues to maintain the illusion that she is only a housewife and not a sex worker. A further confirmation of hiding her sexual and working repression and continuing the illusion of her perfect existent (Freud, 1899) (Jayne Loader, 2005).



Conversation with Sylvan (Figure 10)

Hollywood cinema's trajectory portrayed women as objects, passive, and transparent, with very little substance, side characters to the male protagonist, captured in the voyeuristic nature of the films *Vertigo* and *Rear Window* critiqued by Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975). Akerman subverts this tradition, by firstly filming a female protagonist, in addition to giving Jeanne a complex and unidentifiable identity. This is achieved through minimal dialogue, and the use of objects and lighting indicative of her complex unconscious. Akerman's significant use of the enigmatic blue flashing lights in her front room, hitting the wall and soup tureen where she places her working money, a beacon pointing out the truth of Jeanne's oppressive existence, hidden underneath the illusion of the perfect housewife (BFI, 2022). The soup tureen is symbolic of her prostitution (Bras, 2019), it is always in the forefront of the lounge's mise-en-scene. Indicating the reality and repression continuously looming over her. Most pinacol in the final seven-minute scene, the tureen sat to the right of her, extenuated by the flashing lights above her, together creating the "triangle of guilt" (BFI, 2022) (Figure, 11).

Akerman;

"Jeanne Dielman's defences had snapped, and I wanted to demonstrate that with the strongest sign of her oppression: prostitution... Jeanne Dielman kills to regain her order." (Bergstrom, 1999).

On the last day, Akerman intrudes into the space of the bedroom. When entering, we are completely exposed to her oppression as we witness the act of prostitution. Akerman's choice to intrude on this part of Jeanne's routine gives the audience the final indication of Jeanne's

psychological demise, and inability to hide her inner turmoil and oppression. Jeanne regains her power in the meticulous way; she murders the client, much like the meticulous domestic routine at the start of the film Jeanne is back within routine asserting her agency (Runciman, 2024).



Post-murder, final scene (Figure11)

Conclusion

Although not recognising herself as a feminist filmmaker, Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* aligns with critiques of feminist film theory and second-wave feminism. Jeanne Dielman is prominent in highlighting the importance of feminist aesthetics and redefining the interpretation of women in cinema. In essence, this film is a visceral exploration and approach to female identity, labour, and agency of women in cinema. Following the life of a female protagonist through deliberate unconventional cinematic techniques of minimalism and hyper-realism, Akerman captures the repetitive monotonous nature of Jeanne's existence using the elements of silence, repetition, time, static shots, real-time shots, and lighting. All of these provide a critique of the patriarchal societal norms that confine women's agency and limit them to defined gender roles; specifically domestic. Jeanne defies convention, shifting the gaze from the male to the female, reframing the narrative perspective, and inviting the audience to experience the story through Jeanne's perspective. Using the struggles of Jeanne, to highlight the greater societal issues of oppression.

In conclusion, this essay has explored the key aspects of Akerman's direction, confirming how her film *Jeanne Dielman* prevails as a highly influential and foundational piece of feminist artwork that reimagines the domestic sphere. Challenging traditional gender roles and agency of women in cinema reimagining them through a feminist lens.

List of Illustrations

Figure-1

Alice Guy's 1896 film *La Fée aux Choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*) retrieved

<https://rosannewelch.com/2020/09/03/when-women-wrote-hollywood-the-movies-6-in-a-series-la-fee-aux-choux-the-cabbage-fairy-wr-alice-guy-blache-1896/>

Figures (2-13)

Screenshots retrieved from a digital copy of the film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)

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