Chantal Akerman's films: a dossier

Compiled and introduced by Angela Martin

I won't say I'm a feminist film-maker . . . I'm not making women's films, I'm making Chantal Akerman's films. (London, 1979)

I do think [Jeanne Dielman] is 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. (Camera Obscura, 1977:118)

This film perpetuates the out-dated attitude that a woman's sexuality is not indigenous but bestowed by a man. (Virginia Dignam, Morning Star, 1.6.79)

The film's time-span covers a Tuesday (stew and potatoes), Wednesday (wiener schnitzel) and heady Thursday (meat loaf . . .) . . . Relatively speaking, the schnitzel was rather skimped, but I now know how to make a meat loaf. (John Coleman, New Statesman, 1.6.79)

During the last few months three films by Chantal Akerman, a Belgian woman film-maker, have come into distribution in Britain. Hopefully, they will be booked for women's events, study groups and film courses, which will want information about them. This is one reason for producing a dossier around them: most of the material available on her films is only in the British Film Institute library, and much of that is in French.

Another reason is that neither she nor her films are very well known here, despite the fact that she has obviously been a key film-maker in women's cinema and that her films are relevant to a number of current developments in feminist film criticism. Some of us working in that area have been waiting a few years now for the films to become available in Britain.

Since the films are feature-length (or more) and in French, the cost of making English-language prints is enormous, but offset by their commercial potential. On the continent they play in relatively ordinary cinemas, and have played in one Paris cinema for several months at a time. On the other hand they are not actually commercial-type films, or even 'art cinema' films. It's clear, for example, that the critics quoted above are entirely antipathetic, yet this is perhaps because they were viewing the films in a commercial film or art-cinema context.
The films therefore raise questions *vis-à-vis* the women's movement – we also like to go to the movies; why not? (especially to see films by women). Akerman points out, however, that two women critics who could have interviewed her declined the offer, one of them saying that her films were marginal to the interests of the women's movement. But surely a film (*Jeanne Dielman*) dealing with 'the daily gestures of a woman' cannot be so lightly dismissed? Is it the way these gestures are filmed, or is it that because some of us find housework boring we don't want to watch someone else doing it for some three hours? Whatever the response, the *fact* of housework on the screen is already important, and for this reason our response to it is important too.

The dossier takes the following form: synopses of the films in distribution; extracts from an interview with Chantal Akerman when she was in London in May for the opening of her films at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA); a discussion of some of the questions raised by the films; extracts from other interviews and articles, mostly translated from French; a short filmography and some notes. The questions which are listed below (and which are not by any means exhaustive) could, in a sense, be placed anywhere, and it is for that reason that they are in fact placed here. It was not the intention that anything else in the dossier would exactly answer them, but I hope they and the material included here will contribute to further discussion around the films and the related issues.

Can a film-maker who claims not to be a feminist make feminist films?

Should we expect a feminist film to speak to us directly and immediately? Or is it acceptable to suggest that films which require work on our part (as audience) are not necessarily elitist, and can be equally rewarding?

Are we looking for images of real women or films which are really about women?

Is a new women's language possible? How would it relate to visual imagery? Is a new language necessary, if indeed positive images do exist now (see responses to *Julia*, and so on)? Or, as Laura Mulvey points out, does the new only grow 'out of the work of confrontation that is done' *vis-à-vis* traditional forms of expression and communication?

Should we attempt to understand better the forms through which images are produced? Is it important to distinguish between 'reality and its representation'? Or is the image (the representation) all we need to talk about?

Chantal Akerman began working in a way marginal to the film production system (see the interview), but is now in the position of having to take on that system, which includes having her films screened at festivals to get recognition; distribution on a commercial (or at least financially viable) basis; and the press. This has a number of implications, since none of those institutions is in the main touched by feminism. Eventually, however, it does also have to do with the way we respond to the films, since we read the press, go to cinemas and so on. But to what extent?

How do we cope with the individualism inherent in the notion of 'the artist' in relation to the preference in sexual politics for a notion of collectivity? Is it a problem?
A number of questions arise about the specific films, but the extracts have been chosen in relation to these. There is a more general one relating directly to all the films, though: the question of voyeurism. The lesbian love-making scene in *Je Tu Il Elle* is discussed (below) in terms of whether it meets the requirements, as it were— the conventions— of pornography, or whether in fact certain formal elements prohibit this response on the part of the audience. In *Jeanne Dielman*, John Coleman feels: 'This orgasm-bit is bound to strike the serious-minded as an unfortunate bow to crass commercialism . . . ', while Marsha Kinder, in *Film Quarterly*, says of the bathroom sequence that 'the graphic details destroy the eroticism . . . '. Thus the question of looking is very important. Who looks at whom; whose look does the camera represent; how are we as the audience placed in relation to that point of view and what it shows? And this question of voyeurism is no less important in terms of *News from Home* and its long, static-camera shots of people in the streets and on the subway.

From this question arises the further one of desire and its fulfilment or the pleasure of potential fulfilment, or the discomfort of its denial. Not only in terms of the pleasure of looking (sexually), but also in terms of the pleasure we derive from a film narrative — reaching the end of a story (the resolution of an enigma set up at the beginning of a film). What kind of pleasure do we derive from Akerman's films, if we do, and if we don't, where does the displeasure lie?

**Synopses of the films in distribution**

*Je Tu Il Elle* (1974) — a black and white film (of 95 minutes) which is in three parts. Julie, Akerman alone over several days in a room with very little furniture which she constantly moves around or removes totally from the room — it's an
isolated space within which everything that needs to be done is done, and changes take place, to the limits of the room, the frame and the capability of the camera (to take everything in or exclude all but one object). When she attempts to write to herlover, the camera goes right in to the letter. She then hitchesa lift with a lorry driver, who talks in monologue under the pretext of conversation, about himself, his life and his sexuality. She helps him masturbate. Lastly she goes to a girlfriend's apartment, takes food from her and then seduces her. There is a long sequence of them making love, and the film ends with Julie leaving in the morning.

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) — in colour (3 hours 20 minutes). This is one of the most difficult films to synopsize. Jeanne Dielman (Delphine Seyrig) is a Belgian widow with a teenage son. There is little communication between them, and what there is is functional; the same is true with other people she comes into contact with. Much of the film-time is concerned with the minutiae of her daily routine. The film covers three days, and elements of the routine are repeated with precision so that even objects not in use express and emphasize the ritual. But this routine makes space for prostitution as well, which eventually disrupts the order of her daily life.

News from Home (1976) — colour (85 minutes) is, visually, a series of static camera shots of New York — streets, pavements, fronts of buildings, the doors of a subway train. The sound-track is made up of emphasized noise from the streets, the train and so on, and intermittently of Chantal reading letters from her mother in Belgium. The final, long sequence is a single take of the Statue of Liberty from the Staten Island Ferry.
An interview with Chantal Akerman

Angela Martin — It's important to mention that you're not making small films; you're making feature-length films, which even now not many women are doing. Do you consider yourself to be a woman making films or a feminist film-maker?

Chantal Akerman — I'm a film-maker, but I won't say I'm a feminist film-maker. Immediately you do an interview, they say — oh, you're making a woman's film. No, I'm not making women's films, I'm making Chantal Akerman's films. I didn't decide to make films with feminist points or to change social structures; I decided to make films, to work in that medium, with that art. It so happens I'm a woman and aware of certain problems, but that isn't my main concern in making movies. But, you know, the way I am feminist — to a certain extent — is that I'm very confident in my feelings about what I should do. I'm not someone who thinks that because I'm a woman my thoughts are less good. In that respect I can say I am feminist but not in others. I mean, sure, I think about all the obvious questions about women — like work and abortion. It's certain that women are oppressed and I'm not unaware of it, but I didn't feel it myself, because I started in a marginal way. Which means I wasn't confronted with the system. I worked myself to put money together — in offices, coffee bars and things like that; I didn't go to institutions or financial backers. I provided the money myself by working in another field, then working at night in the editing room, getting a camera for nothing, with £300, £100, £500 — that kind of budget. So with no money and no confrontation with the industry — just very marginal — I wasn't ashamed to do it and I didn't care whether anyone was interested or not. Then I had made a few movies and they were shown in festivals...
and got good reviews. At that point everybody was talking about women, and since I was ready to make a feature with more money, I applied to the Belgian government and it was the right time.

AM — Did you train anywhere?

CA — I spent a few months at a Belgian school but I left — it was supposed to be four years. I worked for myself, with other people — but not as an assistant or anything like that. The first movie I made was my own and ambitious, but I achieved what I wanted in that project, so it gave me confidence. I know a lot of young people who want to begin with a big feature and big actors. I didn’t do it that way; I built up my confidence little by little, step by step, film by film.

AM — Did you have any overall project when you started?

CA — It wasn’t definite, you know. I always wanted to act or write. After I saw one film in particular [Pierrot le Fou, by Jean-Luc Godard], which really did impress me, I decided to make movies instead of acting or writing. But, you know, I hadn’t heard of feminism or socialism at the time, I was just interested in style, in expression. I saw the film once and got energy from it. Now I just remember the song and the colour, but no more, and I don’t want to see it again.

AM — Pierrot le Fou was quite avant-garde...

CA — It didn’t look avant-garde to me when I was fifteen. I had seen maybe ten films in my whole life, but never Jean-Luc Godard’s. When I saw it I didn’t know his name. I was just going out on a Saturday night with a friend, we didn’t know what to do and we saw the name of the picture, so we decided to try and get into it, even though we were under age. We were young girls and it didn’t look avant-garde to us. And I’m sure that could be the case for a lot of people, but the press makes it difficult... The film was very close to my feelings at the time.

AM — What was the budget for Jeanne Dielmann?

CA — Around £100,000.

AM — Did you tell them what it was going to look like?

CA — No, I got the money for another script I intended to shoot, but after a while I hated that script and just wrote Jeanne Dielmann, which was also about a woman.

AM — It’s a film which both makes you aware that it’s a film, unlike — say — most Hollywood films (which hide the fact of being a film in order to tell a story), yet I could imagine my mother, who is not used to avant-garde films, understanding what’s going on in it.

CA — My father and mother, who don’t know anything about movies, never read, listen to music, go to the theatre, just working people, they loved it. My father said to me: I couldn’t stand the first fifteen minutes, but after that I was so fascinated, when it finished I was sad. So, it’s not a difficult film.

AM — Have they seen News from Home?

CA — My mother loved it, but my father was angry because I used my mother’s letters and people would know his business wasn’t going well and things like that.

AM — Is the film in a way your answer to those letters?

CA — No — mm, yes, to some extent. But that’s too easy, it limits the movie too much. It’s my relationship to New York. But to some extent, you are right. You know, when I went to New York, I didn’t tell anyone I was going, I just wrote to my mother when I was there. It wasn’t the first time I’d left home — I’d left before to live in Paris. But it was the first time I hadn’t said anything and that I was going so far. So, I know my mother quite well and I wrote to her a lot so she wasn’t too anxious. And she wrote to me too. So I was there seven months and then left and I went back a few months later. And I was in the plane and I thought — my mother is going to send me those letters again. And I was already
imagining my life in New York. That's how I got the idea of the film. It's more like the shock between her life, her world and what New York really is.

AM — Do you find New York productive for work?
CA — Very much. It's very exciting, it gives you a lot of energy. At the time, I didn't have any money, but I had no chains like you have when you're in your own city. I could do whatever I wanted. Who cared? That was very energizing for me.

AM — Presumably your films are better known in the States than they are here thus far?
CA — Yes. I was very surprised at how little they're known here. There was a woman I met this morning who just didn't want to make the effort, because my name isn't big enough. They'd rather write about Superman. The more they write about Superman, even to criticize it, the more well-known it becomes. It's very easy to say Clint Eastwood is macho; it's much more difficult to write about my movies and make them known.

AM — Unfortunately we haven't yet seen Les rendezvous d'Anna [Akerman's latest film] here — it was shown at the Berlin Film Festival?
CA — No, it was shown on ZDF (one of the German TV stations). They gave me some money towards the budget — and also towards the budget of News from Home.

AM — Did you have any problems with them?
CA — No they're wonderful . . .

AM — It's very important to mention that here . . .
CA — I know, I called someone at the BBC — he didn't know my name; well, why should he? But I told him I was going to make a film from an Isaac Bashevis Singer story (The Estate and the Manor) and he didn't know who that was . . . We've just bought the rights and we're trying to raise the money.

AM — I was very impressed by Je Tu Il Elle when I saw it recently . . .
CA — It's very impressive — very rough too. It's very hard for me to talk about that film. If I wasn't acting in it myself I wouldn't care so much. But I can't stand seeing myself doing those things in the film. When I did it, my movies were hardly being shown at all. So I didn't have a relationship with the public. I didn't know what that meant at the time. And there were just three of us — the camerawoman, a friend who was helping, and me. So it was very easy to make and I wasn't ashamed. But I wouldn't dare do that again — I was completely unaware of how strong it would appear.

AM — What impressed me was the lesbian love-making scene, but as much, the scene with the lorry driver, because it's even more rare to have male sexuality talked about in a film. What kind of feedback have you had?
CA — It's strange — from some women who have problems about their own lesbianism. They say it's not like that — you know, it wasn't charming or nice-looking. That was one point — like it wasn't shown in a very aesthetic way, which for me makes it strong.

AM — Presumably that would precisely be a complaint about other films (that is, pornographic films)?
CA — Well, you know, they have problems with their own image, which is very understandable. I can't stand myself in the movie. I'm not a model and I know what it's like, it's hard. It's hard for people to talk about it too, they talk around the movie. And critics don't seem to write in their own name. At the same time, everybody has a lot of personal problems, but they don't deal with this in their writing. It's as if their writing is coming from somewhere else. One guy (a critic) fell in love with my actress in Rendezvous d'Anna and couldn't stand her making
love with a man in the movie. Nor that she talks to her mother about the relationship she has with another woman. But he doesn’t write in that way; he writes as if he has the truth about everything. That’s the whole problem with critics. They can never be objective. That’s OK, but they don’t have to pretend to be. In France, some of them are homosexual men, which is OK, but it gives them one critical point of view, and they don’t say that in their reviews. You know, people can do whatever they want, but if they have the power that critics have, they have to be less pious.

Notes on the issues raised for feminism by Chantal Akerman’s films

It should be said straight away that interviews are very vulnerable to the conditions in which they’re conducted. The long one with Cahiers du Cinéma quoted from below begins with a short account of why it is their third attempt. Mine with Akerman was not arranged until the last minute and therefore had not been planned. Unfortunately, at the time we both had headaches. It obviously helps, in addition, to come early in a series of interviews — otherwise the questions and answers inevitably get repetitive and tired. But there are other factors too. Had I realised that Chantal would respond to one of the first questions being about feminism in such a way, I wouldn’t have started there. However . . .

What does an interview (or a discussion) with a film-maker mean to our understanding of her or his film? Can a film-maker add anything, and if so, what does that imply about the film and our relationship to it as audience?

There are film-makers who prefer not to talk about their work because film is their way of speaking; if you need to ask them questions about it, either you aren’t sensitive enough or it hasn’t been successful. Others have made a policy decision always — or as often (or for as long) as is practicable — to accompany their films and engage in discussion with an audience. Both these situations imply, in a way, that the source of meaning of a film lies in its director. This is reinforced by what sometimes happens when film-makers appear with their films. In a sense, the meaning of the film is often immediately anchored by whatever the film-maker says about it. But obviously the usefulness of such a dialogue depends on how the film-maker views her or his work in the cinema. John Ford, for example, used the cinema to tell stories; Chantal Akerman, on the other hand, is working on how cinema constructs stories.

The suggestion of a relationship between the film-maker’s intentions and the look of the film therefore implies that everything that has gone into producing that surface appearance is due solely to her or his creativity. It ignores other factors like the script, the production situation (for example, major studio or small crew and small budget), the technical skills and the professional codes that operate them (for example, soft lighting on women’s faces and harder lighting on men’s). It also assumes that we won’t have our own interpretations (readings) of a film when we see it. For example, it was really only when black film critics began to be more widely read that the racism of John Ford’s films was shown to have been overlooked by white critics; similarly, the position of women in Ford’s films when women critics started writing from a feminist perspective.

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The director as creator
The importance accorded a film director (over and above other people working on a film) comes from a notion of ‘the artist and his creativity’:

... an intuitive, mystical rapport is proposed between spectator and creator, at best a matter of hit and miss. (Mulvey, 1979:7) which is very much part of the European cinema context in which Chantal Akerman works.

A great many people working throughout the cinema would like to (or do) see themselves as artists, but the European cinemas have the idea more firmly built into them than the mainstream American cinema, which has until recently had the general notion that a film should only entertain and make money. (Of course, it still has that idea, but in recent years has discovered that ‘artistic’ movies can make money too: for example, Julia, Taxi Driver, Alice Doesn’t Live Here Any More.)

But it is quite within the European art cinema tradition that a film-maker with Akerman’s concerns (see Godard, Straub/Huillet, Fassbinder) is able to make feature-length films which are not such immediately obvious commercial certainties. (Though it is, of course, also partly a result of the existence of the women’s movement that Akerman, a woman film-maker, is equally now given that opportunity.) And it is in line with this European tradition that we — and Akerman too — talk about ‘Chantal Akerman’s films’.

The notion of ‘a Chantal Akerman film’ may appear to contradict the concern of the women’s movement to break down the elevation of the individual by asserting the notion of collectivity. It could be argued, though, that given the enormity of the framework of cinema production, it is necessary for women to assert their right, equal to that of any male director, to make films at every level. Additionally, however, I would suggest that there are two ways in which Akerman breaks with traditional cinema: her work in the avant-garde, and her work on images of women; and that this is in itself an important intervention.

Showing us the world ‘as it is’
Other European directors have, as much as their recent American counterparts, used the techniques of cinema to create the impression of a window through which they show us the world ‘as it is’. Because of this aesthetic of ‘realism’, our response to their films is often at the level of whether what we see through their window is like the view we have from ours. We have protested at the stereotypic images of women as dumb blondes, subservient housewives, prostitutes with or without heart, calculating and inevitably callous career women and so on. And our demand for images of women which relate more to the real as we see it, is satisfied, it would seem, by the fact that the images of women are shown as if real in many European films (by Bergman, Truffaut) and some of the latest American films like Klute, Alice Doesn’t Live Here Any More, Julia. Hence, even if they don’t seem like us they must be like somebody, and often we respond to them equally as if real:

The moment that disturbs me most in Alice ... Alice and her beau finally quarrel [over whether or not her son talks like a sailor]. Alice stalks off in a tearful huff ... It’s a potential turning point and a very loaded moment,
but the film fritters it away by making Kristofferson beg forgiveness and promise to change his ways. What on earth has he done? *Only gotten tough with her, in a way that director Scorsese . . . should have attempted to himself.* (my italics) (Maslin, 1975:45-6)

... the agony and frenzy of *A Woman Under the Influence* almost justify his decision to begin the film in mid-breakdown, with its heroine's madness an inadequately explained given. Perhaps he intended . . . to make hers a nightmare every woman in the audience could understand, with the vague underpinnings of her rage and horror meant to *universalize the experience.* In any case, it *doesn't work, largely because Gena Rowlands — unlike Liv Ullmann or Joanne Woodward, who can sometimes function as Everywoman — is unique . . .* (my italics) (Maslin, 1975:47-8)

Bergman has probed, penetrated, and allowed her to reveal and extend herself in ways that no other director . . . has dared to do . . . Having lived with Ullmann for some five or six years, Bergman knows her moods and contradictions . . . The film [*Scenes from a Marriage*] is ultimately not about Ullmann/Marianne's growth in understanding herself so much as with Bergman's understanding of Ullmann. (Haskell, 1974:118)

Alice is seen as a real person, outside the written script almost, to whom Scorsese should relate; because Gena Rowlands is unique, it is almost as if *she* were breaking down in the film rather than the character she plays, and her uniqueness ironically somehow prevents us from identifying with the character; and in *Scenes from a Marriage* the truth is guaranteed because it's really about Bergman and Ullmann's relationship together and not fiction after all.

In a sense, using such arguments (that is, in terms of realistic portrayal) to discuss films *vis-à-vis* patriarchy is rather like banging your head against a wall that you know won't fall down because it's too well concreted and your head is not the best weapon to use on it. You need similar tools to the ones that built it. And it's not a question of saying there is no truth at all about the world in the kind of films mentioned above; it is rather a matter of working out how that particular truth was constructed and situating it in relation to other truths.

**The spectator and the critic**

In the last section I jumped between spectator as member of an audience and spectator as critic without signalling, partly because I think that in the kind of writing quoted above, the critic (particularly in most journalistic reviewing) is often only once removed from any other spectator.

The women's movement has insisted on the importance of the personal, and personal response to films is very important and totally valid. I personally find Chantal Akerman's films pleasurable, but I'm not sure I should assume anyone other than my close friends would find it interesting to know that.

But in a sense, this is what many journalistic critics believe, or at least it seems it is what they are paid for — to expound from their personal point of view. And although such critics would probably acknowledge that this is *their* point of view, which you are entitled to disagree with, they do tend to assume that theirs is more valid since it is more refined. It may well be that a critic's comments are
insightful, but in this respect insight is relative. Sometimes they say more about the critic than about the object under review. John Coleman, in the New Statesman, is obviously unable to situate Jeanne Dielman anywhere other than in relation to his attitude that what is important in the world does not have to do with whether or how you show housework.

The audience Coleman addresses himself to is perhaps — in general — assumed to be one that is always looking for sensitive portrayals of its own concerns, which include films like The Deer Hunter, An Unmarried Woman and Hard Core as much as Claire’s Knee and The Man Who Loved Women, to which he will guide them. But this throws up a problem. If someone suggested going to watch a movie lasting three hours about housework, would you be enticed? Well, obviously some people are and some aren’t. The real question here is what one goes to watch films for. Do we want entertainment, gentle persuasion of an argument, or active engagement with a film (either about its form or its content or both)? It makes a difference, but the whole viewing situation suggests that it doesn’t (and John Coleman simply views all films within that context). Given that Akerman’s films don’t so easily fit into this viewing pattern, how do we view them?

Akerman’s films, exhibition and the press

Akerman’s films compound many of these problems of exhibition and audience response. The three now in distribution are feature-length or longer and made with relatively big budgets. The cost of putting them into distribution is high and requires not just new prints but English-language sub-titled prints. If they are to be successfully distributed they need to be known about. This requires them to be opened in London on a commercial basis. And in order for films to be commercially successful (so neither the film-maker, the cinema owners or the distribution company lose money — not to mention other people further back down the line), they have to be written about in the national press. This is a fact of life if we want to see more films by women at the cinema (that is, the commercial film circuit).

Previously Akerman could talk about not caring if anyone saw her films; now she is more widely known; her budgets are getting bigger (the next film project is a major one); and the press is an inevitable part of this.

But the terms in which the press talks about films are not the terms in which Akerman’s films are made. In other words, the press does not just talk about whether films are realistic or not, but also about the subject matter — what is the narrative, and is there some universal truth here? And if the women’s press treats Akerman’s films differently than the general press on this last score, it’s perhaps because of the recognition that they are about women.

Akerman’s films and feminism

To go back to an original point: the important question for feminism, as Christine Gledhill points out (see below), is not — is it a film about real women? but — is it really about women? What does it tell us about the position of women in the world and in art? Jeanne Dielman, for example, could in this sense be crudely compared to Alice . . . They are both women alone with teenage sons. In Alice . . . we have a story about a woman in this situation which is entertaining, we can identify with it. But if the question of ‘real women’ and their relationship to our lives is really important, where is our relationship to
this story of Alice? Unless we are really in a similar situation there are certain limitations on what the film can say directly to each of us. *Jeanne Dielman*, on the other hand, is about a female situation which is much more mundane and at the same time more fundamental to the position of women in society. We are not, in this film, pulled along on a wave of realism and emotion, but are impelled to watch and reflect on the process, the gestures of the daily lives of the majority of women.

Obviously the project in each film is different. *Alice* ... offered us a kind of 'positive heroine', something we had been looking for; perhaps Janet Maslin did not feel she had found one. Another difference between the two films is their relationship to us as spectator. *Alice* ... invites us to sit back and enjoy; *Jeanne Dielman* expects us to sit up and pay attention. One is entertainment; the other engagement. For this reason, Akerman’s films require, if not a different viewing situation, at least a different viewing attitude. When friends have asked me if going to see one of the Akerman films at the weekend is a good idea, I find it difficult to answer simply, yes, without saying, well, it’s not a normal Saturday night type of movie.

In the sense of narrative we are used to, Akerman’s films do not have a beginning, middle and end. In *News from Home* there is no character to identify with, and in the other two identification is not a concern in the conventional sense. The form/language of film is not hidden as it is in mainstream: there is often a minimal use of sound or an excess of it; there is often either no dialogue, or there is a voice-over, or it is difficult to hear what is said; the camera is often static and the shots of such length that their duration and the non-movement of the camera become ‘apparent’, particularly in relation to their
content and its conventional representation.

Laura Mulvey's excellent article on 'Feminism and the Avant-Garde' (Mulvey, Spring 1979) discusses how:

... feminists have recently come to see that the arguments developed by the modernist avant-garde are relevant to their own struggle to develop a radical aesthetic ... The questions posed by the avant-garde, consciously confronting traditional practice, often with a political motivation, working on ways in which aesthetic challenges alter relations both with modes of representation and with expectations in consumption — all these questions arise similarly for women ... (Mulvey, Spring 1979:4)
particularly in view of the desire to find a new language for women, or at least to find out if one is possible. As Mulvey points out:

... the crucial problem has to be faced: whether the new can be discovered, like a gold-mine in a garden; or whether the new grows only out of the work of confrontation that is done. (Mulvey, Spring 1979:4)

Much avant-garde work is concerned only with confrontation at the level of form (that is, with the formal means of re-presenting the world without narrative or fiction):

But women cannot be satisfied with an aesthetic that restricts counter-cinema to work on form alone. Feminism is bound to its politics; its experimentation cannot exclude work on content ... (Mulvey, Spring 1979:9)

The importance of Akerman's work is that it is on both these levels at the same time. And, to come back to the original question, the importance of her comments on her own work and cinema in general is that she contributes through her work to the debate about representation and women.

Extracts on Akerman, women's cinema and feminist criticism

Cahiers du Cinéma: How do you situate yourself in relation to women's cinema as it exists now ... and in relation to ideas about the feminine look as having a different vision of the world?

Chantal Akerman: I don't know how to situate myself. But actually I do believe that if we achieve real decolonisation (even if we aren't there yet, it's important to say it, to know it), there can be a female language, which would not, however, be the same for all women. There are some silly ideas around: for example, I'm often asked why I always place my camera so low. It's probably quite simply related to my height and the position from which I view things. Recently I've been taken to see Ozu's films, because it seems they resemble Jeanne Dielman: it's true Ozu also looks from low down, but it's also true that the Japanese are often seated on the ground. That in itself is already important. I also believe that we have a rhythm, if only sexually, physically, biologically, which is different from that of men ... It's really a hard problem to try to say what differentiates a woman's rhythm in film because a man can use these same forms of expression. I don't know if we have the words, if they exist yet. I don't think we know
enough about women’s films even to... I can talk about myself but I can’t speak in a general, theoretical way at all. I just think that I’ve finally reached the right point, meaning that I agree with what I do. It’s not like I feel one way and my work expresses something else. But I can’t define it any more theoretically. We speak of ‘women’s rhythm’, but it isn’t necessarily the same for all women. I also think that Hollywood doesn’t express a man’s rhythm either, but the rhythm of capitalism or fascism. Men are cheated by it too.

But you know, some theorists say it is because we experience pleasure in another way than men do. Sexual pleasure. I really think that in movies it’s right there. When I saw Hotel Monterey again this morning, I really thought it was an erotic film. I felt that way — la jouissance du voir.*

(Interview with Akerman, Camera Obscura, 1977:121)

... And that is a question of the level of consciousness. For example: is it true that a woman can fantasize having violence done to her, or not? I don’t know and nor do I know if it’s something generally learned. But I know for myself and for other women, that one can have that desire. Well, that’s another matter. But if that level of discourse goes on unconsciously, at the level of cinema, it’s serious, especially at this moment. So, if an awareness is developed, a level of consciousness is reached: one won’t produce that cinema unconsciously. One can say it, but it must be said with consciousness. I don’t want to say it’s necessary to make ‘positive’ films, saying exactly how things must be and offering solutions, but even so I think it’s necessary to have a conscious relationship with oneself. Conscious to a certain point, because not everything is calculated and the most interesting things are often erased from consciousness. Perhaps in five, ten, twenty years, I don’t know, there could be films in which women express themselves in a completely different language. And men too, but different again.

(To interview in Cahiers du Cinéma, July 1977:36)

Cahiers du Cinéma: In the films by women that have most interested me, what often seems to me to be most new and surprising is a different way of filming women, of filming men. In Jeanne Dielman, for example, and no doubt it’s because I’m a man, I found the son much more touching. Similarly the lorry driver in Je Tu Il Elle.

CA: I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about it. But I believe it’s not how one films men or women, it’s simply how one films. (Interview in Cahiers du Cinema, July 1977:36)

The problem for feminist analysis of the impulse of traditional criticism to locate meaning in character is first that it leads the critic into moralistic assessment of the heroine and her subjectivity in terms of its truth to the actual condition of women, or to supposed female aspiration, or to a feminist perspective on either. The problem with this is that ideological myths about women are as much a part of the real world as any other construct. Thus to use a particular individual’s notion of ‘the realistic’ as a criterion of truth can only lead to disagreement, and if used simply to dismiss what is defined as stereotypical, to the elimination of the chance to examine the power of recognition which certain character structures may invoke.

* The pleasure of looking, but jouissance refers more specifically to sexual pleasure relating to orgasm.
Second, as I have already suggested, the character becomes the dominant element in the text, the focus of its 'truth' in terms of which all other aesthetic structures are read. Such a procedure ignores the fact of character as a production of these mechanisms and of its structural location within the narrative. As I hope to show in terms of film noir, these structural determinants can be crucial in affecting the degree or otherwise of ideological control over the character. If a positive heroine is to be created, who can speak from and for the woman's point of view, then there has to be a change in the structures of fictional production and these have first to be identified for their patriarchal determinations.

The concept of the woman's discourse avoids this collapse of text into character: it is equally valuable in that it cuts across the form/content division and similarly the division fiction/society. A discourse is shared by a socially constituted group of speakers or particular social practice, provides the terms of what can or cannot be said, and includes all those items, aesthetic, semantic, ideological, social, which can be said to speak for or refer to those whose discourse it is. It is to be distinguished from point of view in that the latter is attached to a particular character or authorial position, while a discourse stretches across the text through a variety of different articulations, of which character is only one; it need not be coherent but can be broken by a number of shorter or longer gaps or silences.

A filmic text is composed of a variety of different discourses which may be organized along class, racial or gender lines, to name a few. The structural coherence of the text arises from the inter-relations of its discourses, while ideological hegemony is gained by the power of the discourse carrying the dominant ideology to place and define the 'truth' of the others. Within patriarchal culture the various discourses that interweave through a specific text are so organized along gender lines as to give priority to the 'male discourse'. One form of subversion that feminists will look for, then, are those moments when in the generic play of convention and stereotype the male discourse loses control and the woman's voice disrupts it, making its assumptions seem 'strange'. From this perspective, the question the feminist critic asks is not 'does this image of woman please me or not, do I identify with it or not?' but rather of a particular conjuncture of plot device, character, dialogue or visual style: 'what is being said about women here, who is speaking, for whom?' (Gledhill, 1978:12-13)

Akerman ascribes her direct and non-prurient attitude to sexuality to her Jewish background. It is a background that has affected her work in other ways. In Les rendezvous d'Anna (yet to be released in the UK) Anna's journey takes on a historic dimension echoing the Jewish emigration west. But in other films you can see a tension between the strength of family ties and the heritage of an unsettled past. Present restlessness, self-imposed uprooting brings absence, particularly of the mother, into relief. It is difficult to tear away the difference between Chantal's use of her own life and experiences and her narrative, her transformation of her life into the raw material of fiction. (Mulvey, 1979)

Extracts on Je Tu Il Elle

When I say: the woman at the centre of Chantal Akerman's films is her, I'm not talking about autobiography. Autobiography — doing one's own portrait — is an idea of men. They recount their adolescence, their first sexual excitements, the
Chantal Akerman dossier

stirrings caused by Bernadette Lafont's short skirt. Autobiography is Truffaut's idea in *Les 400 Coups*, it's Eustache and his *Amoureuses*, it's Drach, it's Claude Berri. It's what is called in English being self-indulgent: that's to say, being indulgent toward the small child one has been... When Chantal Akerman puts herself in *Saute ma Ville, La Chambre, Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, she is not doing her own portrait. She is speaking of woman, of a woman at the same time abstract and universal. She is an abstraction of woman, a concretization of all women... I believe the nuance between the male-autobiographical film and Chantal Akerman originates in this: male film-makers who see themselves as small boys always believe themselves to be unique. Or, more exactly, the unique issue of Proust or of *Portrait of the Artist* Joyce. Unique and like their illustrious elders. Chantal Akerman puts herself, naked, in her own films and talks about her 'difference'. Using words and images without reference, since women don't have an artistic or literary past, or very little of one. (Clouzot, 1976:67-8)

*Cahiers du Cinéma*:... The way you filmed the sexual relationship is quite violent. Why this scene?

**Chantal Akerman**: It's the story of someone who is in crisis precisely because things don't work out with another person -- this other girl. Despite this she's going back to see her after a long time. She refuses everything, knowing very well it's not a real refusal. So there's a tension there as between people who haven't seen each other in a long time. That's on the level of narrative. And there's also the fact that since it's not the norm, the outcome is uncertain; that partly explains the violence. I conceived that scene in three moments. First, the moment of discovery, which is more a collision of bodies, followed by a more tender moment, and then something more erotic. That was a little bit the idea.
So again it wasn’t a question of signalling: they’ve lain down together. There’s nothing of interest in that. It would just move the narrative on to something else or the whole film would have been about that statement. Whereas here it’s experienced differently. And if it’s violent, that’s because it’s a passionate relationship and a contradictory one. Why can’t women’s relationships with each other also be violent, even if it’s not what people would like to see? I would show what fitted the situation without seeking a general image, a discourse. In any case the film wasn’t made for that. I think showing a relationship between women is already not bad, it’s sufficient in itself as a discourse. (Cahiers du Cinéma, July 1977)

I believe in particular that the long sexual sequence, as close as is possible both to porn and to its destruction, takes its violence from the conjunction of four elements: its introduction by a laconic voice-off — ‘She said I’d have to leave in the morning’; the announcement — advertisement even — of a time limit subverts the intemporaliry and the glorious sense of eternity of porn sex scenes. At the same time, by the neutrality with which it is pronounced, it forbids any adventurous implication linked to the idea of a ‘hasty meeting’, any connotation of pathos attached to the idea of precariousness and transience; the presence of two women in the picture, one of whom — of primary importance — is the film-maker herself, in the process of maturing (in porn cinema, female homosexuality is never more than one of a number of elements in male sexual fantasy); the length of the three shots and the fixed frame, when it is the rule to fragment, cut up, multiply the number of camera angles and close-ups, no doubt with a view to prompting hope of an inexhaustible variety in the sexual relations. One would be unable to illustrate better than here what Lacan formulates as the little two bodies clasping each other manage to achieve together in a moment, except to struggle against each other and tear each other apart (which is almost the case) or, at best, to regress orally into sucking each other away (which is exactly the case); finally, and perhaps above all, the noise, the insistence of sounds, as opposed to the silence or the obligatory glorifying music in such a case (not even to mention the grotesque pantings or howls of pleasure, synchronized or added on). (Narboni, 1977, La quatrieme personne du singulier* : 7)

Extracts on Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

Cahiers du Cinéma: 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’s 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, for example, 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...

(Interview with Cahiers du Cinéma, July 1977)

Jeanne Dielman is not realism, it’s hyper-realism: schematizing a reality in such a way that when we see Delphine (Seyrig) make a coffee we see all the women in

* The fourth person singular.
the world making coffee. It’s worked as a schema: she doesn’t add her own madness to these gestures, she doesn’t make superfluous movements, she doesn’t huff and puff.

It’s a work of *mise en scène:* I wanted precise gestures, defined within the space, which she did very well. It wasn’t necessary for her to play a character with particular habits or particular ways . . .

People didn’t want to be challenged with this image of Delphine, which suggested that she oughtn’t to do washing up. It was even stronger with all this behind it. It’s part of the myths we trail around about women. If I’d used my mother, it would have been just my mother. It was important that it be an actress, because it wasn’t just Jeanne Dielman. Otherwise, each gesture would not have had the essence of that gesture, its truth . . .

Above all I wanted to work on language by taking images which, in the cinema in general, tend to get ellided 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. With the same subject I could have made a commercial film: not showing what generally develops within the ellipsis. Whereas I work with images which are between the images. (Treilhou, 1976:90-2)

Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*, all 198 minutes of it, is an example of what is frequently referred to as ‘minimal’ cinema. So far as one can make out from previous experience (e.g. the works of Straub), this means that the camera rests for the maximum amount of time on something boring before there is a cut to a new static set-up and a prolonged stare at something even more boring . . . Jeanne Dielman is stoically embodied by the elegant Delphine Seyrig, here looking drab . . . The film’s time-span covers a Tuesday (stew and potatoes), Wednesday (wiener schnitzel) and heavy Thursday (meat loaf and Jeanne has an orgasm and kills her client with a pair of scissors). This orgasm-bit is bound to strike the serious-minded as an unfortunate bow to crass commercialism on Ms. Akerman’s part: it kept me hanging in. After the murder, Jeanne sits at a table, for five minutes by my colleague Nicholas Wapshott’s watch. Relatively speaking, the schnitzel was rather skimmed, but I now know how to make a meat loaf. (Coleman, 1979)

This film perpetuates the out-dated attitude that a woman’s sexuality is not indigenous but bestowed by a man. An attitude which runs counter to the radical belief of sexual politics which states that a woman is responsible for and acknowledges her own sexuality.

At a time when women’s role in society is being increasingly challenged, it is

** Literally, ‘placing in the scene’: it relates to the use of the space available — within the screen frame.
reactionary to return to such demoralizing myths. The Victorian 'sexualization' of marriage has contributed to many of the ills of the enclosed nuclear family which still demands sexual role playing. (Dignam, 1979)

The central problem in feminist film and literary works now is this: is it possible for the woman to express her own desires? Who speaks when she speaks? In Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who . . .*, for example, the woman's thoughts are spoken by a male voice-over narration. The woman is separated from her own language. She is quite literally spoken by men. In *Jeanne Dielman* the problem is expressed through diegetic* silence. Although the repression of the woman's voice is naturalized by the fiction — most of Jeanne's time is spent alone, and she and her son need few words to sustain their relationship — the duration, both of the shots and of the fiction, and the lack of variation in the enunciation of images work to denaturalize this repression . . .

The controlling discourse is constructed of looks, not voices. A dialectic operates between the one looking (camera/director) and what is being looked at (characters' actions, characters' space). Unlike the network of looks in most films, which is mediated predominantly by eye-line matches and other kinds of match-cutting, the logic of viewer/viewed in this film bypasses the fiction. The system of subjective shots is eliminated and with it a logic of spatial matches rationalized by the interest of various characters. The logic of the organization of shots reverts to the camera and its marked controller, a feminist film-maker . . .

*Jeanne Dielman* brings us into a discourse of women's looks, through a woman's viewpoint. It is the quality and interest of the controlling look that makes *Jeanne Dielman* stand out formally as feminist, and not any particular formal feature such as the absence of the reverse shot or the duration, alone. That this discourse is realized in silence adds to its eloquence. Who knows yet what an unalienated feminine language would sound like? We know that *Jeanne Dielman* was made in a feminine environment: the director, the main actor, the camera-person, the crew, were all women. The look of camera/director is permissive in that it allows Jeanne her space and the time it takes to complete her actions. Akerman said: "It was the only way to shoot that film — to avoid cutting the woman into a hundred pieces, to avoid cutting the action in a hundred places, to look carefully and to be respectful. The framing was meant to respect her space, her, and her gestures within it." Yet it is a look as obsessive in its interest as Jeanne is in her movements. *Jeanne Dielman* is the image of the old viewed actively, with fascination. *La jouissance du voir* is not denied. (Bergstrom, 1977: 116-8)

My point of view was that in fact 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 I really think that 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. It's the ritual and the routine that had kept her going. You see? First the ritual is imposed on you. And after it's the ritual that keeps you going because otherwise . . . You know what I mean? So, in fact,

* Diegesis is a term used to indicate everything in the film-story, the fiction.
it's having that orgasm that is 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 any more. When she asks her son to come home earlier than usual, 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, not premeditated. (*Camera Obscura, 1977*)

Time and space, the two mental constructs by which humans organize experience, are treated unconventionally. Most of the scenes are shot in real time. When Jeanne bathes before dinner, we don't see merely a few erotic glimpses of flesh in the water; rather, we witness the entire functional process as she actually scrubs every part of her body and then cleans out the tub. The graphic details destroy the eroticism and make us aware of just how unreal and contrived most other bath scenes really are. This use of real time forces us to see how many steps are involved in each simple task.

The full title of the film immediately tells us that Jeanne Dielman is defined and circumscribed by the space she occupies—"23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles". The patterns of her life have been determined by the social-economic structures of her society. In the post office, an old woman stands patiently waiting at a window as though she has had a lifetime of training in this pastime; the department stores are full of other middle-aged women like Jeanne on quests for buttons and notions. As in the *Diaries of Anais Nin*, the consciousness and

* Mistake, but originates in Freud and has been translated (officially) as para-praxis.
body of the female protagonist are identified with her rooms and house: all are empty spaces waiting to be entered and activated by the male visitor. (Kinder, 1977:4)

Her daily circuit consists of darkness and light. Jeanne turns out the light of each room she leaves (cheeseparing economy); she surrounds herself with darkness... the only light illuminating the ritual, the ritual of household chores, of the cooking, which she accomplishes with the care, the fascinating precision of a magician. 'The nimble-fingered housewife' or 'the fairy of the home', significant phrases which here take on their proper sense of supernatural, of outside-nature (the fairy), such is the perfection...
The third day is the worst — she's ahead of herself, which means there is dead time, the obsessive order starts to fall down and the (self)protection to give way (long shot of Jeanne flopped in an armchair, duster in hand).

These are insignificant* gestures (they become signs in the film) which will translate the line of the perspective, the decoding of the real: the coffee will not percolate (three times running she throws it away); cutlery slips through (escapes) her fingers; she forgets to do up her buttons (connotation: she forgets to close herself up, to protect herself, leaving a gaping hole in which the penetration of the strange body will establish itself — the other self, the Other, that's to say also the other, the client of the third day, through whom will be introduced pleasure which is incompatible with repressed desire).

He breaks down the barrier of the 'two Selves' (the destructive drive of the repressed resurges with this violence in the murder), and Jeanne will kill the client of the third day. She has nothing to do with 'the criminal'; she's too 'familiar' to us; she has to do with the ultimate irrational transgression of an order — her order (in the sense of moral order and of an orderly, meticulious person). (Dubroux, 1976:18-20)

Extracts on News from Home

The camera in News is lost within the city, the streets, the subway. No itinerary seems to be leading somewhere and giving an appearance of cohesion to these scattered locations. A camera so lost that the people it films seem not to see it, and when they do see, it's only with an empty or fixed stare that says nothing... Crossroads, subway stations, streets, tracks. But a camera that opposes them with its steadiness, its capacity to capture not only lines of vanishing perspective but also obstructed lines, blocked by other verticals: which cut them. The traveling shot from the car shows roads closed by apartment blocks. In the subway, the frame is that of the doors, of the window, or of the platform framed by a pillar (quadrilinearity) closing off the vanishing line. The image stumbles on itself. Flat image, labyrinthine space, which incessantly closes up again. (Dubroux, 1977:40-1)

* The French plays here on the pun of insigne/sign to show that the film uses these gestures throughout to indicate how Jeanne's life is ritualized/ordered, so that it is through the same gestures that we understand the development of the film's meaning.
Chantal Akerman: The final shot of *News from Home* is very impressive.

Chantal Akerman: It lasts ten minutes, and I found it so beautiful there was no reason to stop it, except the end of the reel! To be no longer able to see New York was so symbolic that I preferred to stay on this image in the mist. It's better to keep a touch of suspense and not say: 'OK, boom, it's all sewn up, it's ended...' That's so much in people's code of behaviour — which will have to go — that it must not be: at the end of a ninety-minute film, pfuit! (*Cinématographe*, 1977:23)

**Chantal Akerman Filmography**

1968 — *Saute ma ville* (short)
1971 — *L'enfant aimé* (short)
1972 — *Hotel Monterey
 La chambre* (short)
1973 — *Le 15/18* (40 minutes; co-directed with Samy Szlingerbaum)
1974 — *Je Tu Il Elle*
1975 — *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*
1976 — *News from Home*
1978 — *Les rendezvous d'Anna*

**Notes**

Angela Martin trained as a teacher in film studies and edits books on and for cinema/TV education at the British Film Institute. She is a founder member of the Women and Film Study Group. Until recently she has been active on women's
issues within ASTMS but is currently concentrating on writing an introductory book on studying women and the cinema.


The three films are available from The Other Cinema, 12-13 Little Newport Street, London WC2. 01-734 8508/9.

Advice and/or further information on film teaching, women and cinema etc. is available from the Education Advisory Service, BFI, 127 Charing Cross Road, London WC2. 01-437 4355.

**Suggested further reading**

‘Feminism, Film and the Avant-Garde’ by Laura Mulvey in *Framework* No.10, Spring 1979, University of Warwick, Coventry, Warks.


*Camera Obscura*, a journal of feminism and film theory, published three times a year, from PO Box 4517, Berkeley, CA 94704, USA.

*Framework*, a film journal published by the University of Warwick, AAS Federation, University of Warwick, Coventry, Warks.


All the above and other relevant journals and books are available for reference in BFI library or for purchase from the Motion Picture Bookshop, National Film Theatre, South Bank, Waterloo, London SE1.

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