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Confronting the Fear of Being Alone in the Work of Chantal Akerman

In thinking about the work of the late Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman, I realized that her early works, such as News From Home and Je tu il elle, elicited and perhaps celebrated the banal and the efficient potential of occupying female space. Describing the daily comings and goings of female bodies within space as banal is a strong assertion that immediately receded into something else—her female protagonists grapple with their emotions, many of which come through in the tedium of the everyday. Often Akerman is associated with a statement made during an interview given with Angela Martin in 1979:

I’m a film-maker, but I won’t say I’m a feminist film-maker…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…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.¹

This statement contradicts a sentiment expressed by Akerman in the journal Camera Obscura, which seems to have gotten lost in the fold; she says, “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.”² So what exactly is feminist filmmaking according to Akerman’s statements?

Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, one of Akerman’s most well-known films, was one of her early feature length experiments in woman, her body, her emotions, and her emotion-laden actions. I am truthfully not as interested in the banality enacted by her characters but instead the agency in which banality could be seen as a defiant feminist act, and I hope to use


Jeanne Dielman as an example of Akerman’s films in which the female body becomes more apparently abject (and I will expand upon this in a moment). Unfortunately, her contemporaries, in as many films before, stripped female characters of their agency, thus marrying them with unfortunate tropes, such as the Damsel in Distress, the Disposable Woman, the Disposable Sex Worker, or the Final Girl. Jeanne Dielman was different in this way, allowing its lead (played by Delphine Seyrig) to delve into the daily tasks of a homemaker, pausing intermittently to entertain gentleman clients and make money through the demure employment of sex work in this routine.

Though this film was released in 1975, many successive films, especially those in my lifetime, coincide with the horror genre, which, according to the tropes I listed, do not usually prove kind to women. My argument for the abject female body in Jeanne Dielman as my primary example uses Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as a basis for my dealings with the female body as meriting a fear through the film viewing experience; if a woman is alone, she is vulnerable, and this could be seen as a minute way of making the female body abject in the face of visual media. I do not intend to think of the female body as abject to perpetuate the thought of violence, though I see its becoming abject as a result of sexist treatment of the female body in films made before Akerman’s time and as recently as the current time.

To see a lone female body in a given scene is to be reminded of its inherent mortality. Judith Butler cites Kristeva’s theory of abjection through explicating Iris Marion Young’s appropriation of Kristeva; Butler writes: “Kristeva shows how the operation of repulsion can consolidate ‘identities’ founded on the instituting of the ‘Other’ or a set of Others through exclusion and domination.”³ The boundary that divides one’s inner and outer identity worlds loses its non-transparency as the inner inevitably becomes outer. That expulsion of the inner

³ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 170.
becomes the abject matter that is more viscerally described in Kristeva’s writings, such as her rumination on the skin that forms on the top of milk. Identity, whether it relates to race, sexual orientation, or gender, becomes akin to blood or sweat, and it disgusts in the way those against these identities are adverse to their subjective provocations. The subject’s identity becomes object, and the objecthood, the immateriality, of the object is that which is forcibly abject.

The viscerality of looking at bodily fluids, even fake bodily fluids, is the undercurrent of what I feel many have become desensitized to while confronted with media. That is not to say that I cannot still feel disgust when looking at a pool of blood, but it is not as gut-wrenching or nauseating as it might have been in past confrontations with bodily matter. I can feel an acute breakdown between image and feeling when I see a lone female body occupying a space on screen; perhaps this is what results when we are taught that female bodies are most vulnerable to violence (or toxic masculinity) when in solitary visual contemplation.

Jeanne as a capable female character lead me to immediately wonder about her safety and vulnerabilities of an inhabitant of her body. Explicit intimacy between viewer and subject closes the inherent distance that comes with viewing. We are, as viewer, participating willingly in what Laura Mulvey refers to as scopophilia; the audience inevitably finds a strange kind of voyeuristic pleasure in watching Jeanne cook, read, knit, and bathe. However, this perpetuates Jeanne vulnerability, and had me, as viewer, continuously wondering if this vulnerability, especially through sexual freedom, could lead to corporeal violence.

The banal, as a tool of turning inward throughout Dielman’s three hours, twenty-one minutes at length, transposes itself upon its audience as a kind of acute boredom or listlessness.

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Scott Richmond refers to this banality as a “profound boredom,” applying it to Andy Warhol’s stillies with the same sentiment that can be found in the tedium of a housewife’s routine; after witnessing someone else’s routine that directly mirrors similar household rituals despite minute cultural differences, there begins a turning-inward of sorts, allowing the viewer to become more narcissistic through the action of seeing Dielman’s focused actions around her home. Richmond writes: “…the cinema itself depends upon and effects a coupling of two bodies: one, effortfully attentive; the other, promiscuously libidinous. From this perspective, the cinema may just be a technology to occasion or produce this coupling.”5 The situated body of the viewer, that subject whose role I assumed while viewing Dielman, felt this duality during the course of the film’s runtime, often feeling that attentiveness turning to thoughts of wishing safety for the protagonist in an attempt to reach a more active viewing experience or indulging in possible outcomes for the character. Her movements were concise and exacted, leaving me to feel as if there was a lingering unpredictability I could not shake. This became more exacerbated by the end of the film.

Much of the film uses an approximate medium wide shot to keep Jeanne (or her son) in frame. The camera does not move from its fixed spot during a given scene; it does not pan or zoom in or out for dramatic effect. It surveys its surroundings from one position, allowing a sense of neutrality on behalf of the director and spectator. In a way, this is entirely radical on its own—Akerman chooses to let the movement in the scene dictate what meaning could be behind it rather than dictating meaning herself. These shots are composed and skillfully edited to

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illustrate a seamless transition between physical on-screen movement and narrative. Despite the lack of a verbal explicitness about the narrative, Akerman’s camera demands one.

The abject is that which does not adhere to order or boundaries, and much of what is abject is lawlessness and surprise nature. Kristeva explicitly states: “It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”\footnote{Julia Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection}, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), 4.} Violence against women is often the narrative that permeates various iterations of popular culture; it often propels protagonists in literature and film to find a kind of triumphant success in resolution.

Jeanne interacts with three clients throughout the course of the film. The first, not even two minutes in, is comprised of a mild mannered, straightforward business transaction; she escorts him down the length of the hallway, the camera lingering until Jeanne returns a coat and scarf to the man with a distant expression on her face as she cups her hands in front of her waist, waiting for payment. The second is less straightforward, as she leads the man through a darkened hallway, insinuating that a greater length of time has passed, and it is evident that her hair is disheveled. Earlier, she had taken her time in spraying and coiffing her hair at her vanity; after the client leaves, Jeanne hurriedly cleans her bed, the bathtub, and returns to the kitchen to find the potatoes burned. The sighs and goes out to purchase more potatoes for her meal with her son. This is what makes the scene of her sitting at the table, peeling potatoes, more disarming as a viewer; she drags the knife across the potatoes with an exasperated, yet subtle aggression that manifests itself by the end of the film. This second client has evidently done something to disrupt the predictability of the film to this point, as well as Jeanne’s routine.
Jeanne has been violated or assaulted, and despite the calm, collected look on her face that characterizes her throughout the film, there is something off. The man in question does not seem to be of any note, acting similar to the preceding client. That feeling of discomfort in viewing the banality of Jeanne’s routine seems more justified; her solitude becomes abject, especially when related to its accompanying female body, that same body that has performed household chores up until this point in the film. Something horrible in nature has happened to Jeanne, and I assumed it was related to my feeling of seeing a vulnerable woman falter at the hands of an extraneous male presence.

As written by Akerman, the film was originally intended to be more sociological than overtly feminist in tone; the lead character being a housewife enacting related rituals and a prostitute were two concrete tenants of the film while it was being made by its director. The scenes with the second client and its aftermath have always been more ambiguous in context. In a 1976 interview with B. Ruby Rich, Akerman states:

…it was an orgasm, for me, even though I don’t show it, that provokes the little things that happen afterwards. It’s not a Freudian explanation…But for me, in her situation, the fact to not have orgasm was her last strength, you know, the last space of freedom…

According to Akerman, she intended for the resounding implications of Jeanne’s meeting with her client to have overtones of violation; this is evident to her viewer, regardless of the unknown nature of the violation itself. The orgasm, as a physical manifestation of sexual pleasure, is a forced violation upon Jeanne, especially as she is established beforehand as emotionally guarded and comfortable in her solitude; these men that come through her home are not necessarily anything but income to her, yet this second client clearly crosses a boundary she

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never intended to be crossed, as to enforce distance. This is abjection, as enacted in a physical space; her body produces an orgasm, that which threatened her sense of safety and well-being as a woman. This produces the infiltration of vulnerability that I felt was inevitable in the beginning of the film despite the sense of predictability performed by Akerman as the director.

The second client leads to the culmination of Jeanne’s behavior towards the end of the film. Her perceived loss of freedom as a woman operating in the world on her own terms causes a shift in routine. Janet Bergstrom refers to this as a “gradual acceleration of unconscious” that precedes this final act, as Jeanne’s routine is disturbed, with her final captured moments inundated with a build up of violent feeling as she buries her face into her blanket while a man is on top of her. This is not overt or ornamented with erratic audible and physical gesturing until we are allowed into her bedroom for this final appointment; instead, she chooses to walk over to her bed on which the third client lays and quietly stabs him with scissors in a direct, pointed jab. Her womanhood is disturbed by the discovery of its perceived abjectness, and the successive murder is an attempt at catharsis or mediating the disarray.

_Dielman_ resolutely subverts the underlying tones of violence at its perceived climax, proving influential on the actions of future lone heroines in film; despite Jeanne’s expulsion of violence due to her own infiltrated vulnerabilities, it proves that female agency is huge, illustrated component of Akerman’s film. She violates he whom she perceives as representative of her clientele despite not being the initial perpetrator, and as she sits alone after the murder at her table with blood on her blouse and her hand, the viewer is allowed to sit with her and empathize, or at least become a voyeur of her personal shift. A small smile then creeps upon her

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lips and she slowly bows her head at the film cuts to black. This is being conditioned to see the female body as abject, Akerman’s narrative taking one trope, a housewife, and completely diverting from her expected fate.
Bibliography


