



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 1

Jeanne Dielman

23, Quai du Commerce,

1080 Bruxelles

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Such a sudden shake-up at the top of *Sight and Sound's* ten-yearly poll! Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) heads the 2022 list. No other film made by a woman has ever even reached the top ten. In the first instance, this is unsurprising: women film directors have always, obviously, been few and far between; equally obviously, the contributing critics have been predominantly male. It was when *Sight and Sound* expanded the critics' pool in 2012 that *Jeanne Dielman* first entered the list, at number 35; its rise to the top now is a triumph for women's cinema.

But perhaps the ultimate surprise goes even further: the film that collected the most votes in 2022 is made with a cinematic style and strategy closer to *avant garde* than mainstream traditions and, furthermore, at just under three and a half hours, demands dedicated viewing. Although confrontational, idiosyncratic and extraordinary films have consistently appeared lower in the lists, the experimental tradition, to which *Jeanne Dielman* belongs, is – apart perhaps from the recent appearance of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) – absent. While it has brought this tradition to the top of the list, *Jeanne Dielman* is inescapably a woman's film, consciously feminist in its turn to the *avant garde*. On the side of content, the film charts the breakdown of a bourgeois Belgian housewife, mother and part-time prostitute over the course of three days; on the side of form, it rigorously records her domestic routine in extended time and from a fixed camera position. In a film that, agonisingly, depicts women's oppression, Akerman transforms cinema, itself so often an instrument of women's oppression, into a liberating force.

Laura Mulvey, *Sight and Sound*, 1 December 2022

In January 1976 *Le Monde* heralded Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* as 'the first masterpiece in the feminine in the history of the cinema'. The unconventional style (frontally centred images, elliptical and disjunctive editing) and subject (a woman's alienation from her daily routine as a housewife and involvement in a discrete form of prostitution that leads her to murder) made the film a powerful sign of a decade when feminism erupted into the arena of politics and film. In *Jeanne Dielman* Akerman conveyed the insistent presence of a viewpoint outside the story proper: her own – a young woman absorbed by the world of her mother's generation. And her film still seems remarkably modern, all three hours and 20 minutes of it.

But *Jeanne Dielman* was not the only groundbreaking film Akerman made during the 70s. Her handful of completed works posit cinema as a developing artform that every new film should advance. Partly thanks to dedicated programmers, sympathetic distributors and screening venues and committed journals, these films gained a high profile and attracted an increasingly engaged, passionate audience. This 70s infrastructure probably seems more distant now than the fiery polemics around feminism and film, but it was every bit as central to what people talked and wrote about.

Akerman the filmmaker came of age at the same time as the new age of feminism, and *Jeanne Dielman, Je, tu, il, elle* (1974) and *News from Home* (1976) became key texts in the nascent field of feminist film theory. Feminism posed the apparently simple question of who speaks when a woman in film speaks (as character, as director...); Akerman insisted convincingly that her films' modes of address rather than their stories alone are the locus of their feminist perspective.

The many arguments about what form a 'new women's cinema' should take revolved around a presumed dichotomy between so-called realist (meaning accessible) and *avant garde* (meaning elitist) work; Akerman's films rendered such distinctions irrelevant and illustrated the reductiveness of the categories. That her films were openly autobiographical, yet in a stylised, indirect manner, and that the aspect of her life she often represented concerned her relationship with her mother attracted great interest. And her role as actress in the long, nude, lesbian sex scene at the end of *Je, tu, il, elle*, filmed in an uncomfortably direct yet distanced manner, provided a startling new perspective on voyeurism, exhibitionism and the woman's image on screen.

Made by a crew composed almost exclusively of women and a 24-year-old female director working outside the dominant system and the norms of length, plot, visualisation and address, *Jeanne Dielman* was seen as a model for a cinema of the future in which filmmakers would embrace woman-centred means of expression as well as content. One of the aspects of Akerman's visual style that was most noted was the separation she maintained between the visual field occupied by the camera, which she has often equated with her own view, and the field observed by the camera. There is an absence of the conventional shot/reverse-shot rhetoric of editing and a skilled use of ellipsis that emphasises the separation of these two fields. A choice has been made not to draw the viewer into the psychological depths of dramatic verisimilitude.

Akerman called *Jeanne Dielman* a feminist film, but not a militant one: Jeanne is neither a role model nor an example of a victim. The film chronicles three days in the life of a middle-class Belgian widow who cares for her teenage son; she has maintained her role as housewife and her routine inside her home, each moment taken up by a specific task, by becoming a discrete prostitute, receiving a respectable man nearly wordlessly each afternoon. But her order is disrupted by the second client, probably because of an unwanted sexual orgasm, and she is unable to put back the pieces after having so carefully defended herself against intrusion into her private world. On the third day, she murders the man after they have sex. '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.' The protagonist's daily routine is shown in minute detail, except for the bedroom scenes. There, we enter only on the last day and are kept at a distance.

Akerman stated in an interview with *Camera Obscura*: '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, and I don't think that's accidental. It's because these are women's gestures that they count for so little.'

Akerman once thought of dedicating *Jeanne Dielman* to her mother, and in an interview she described her love for the mother's gestures which she observed with so much care. 'I was looking with a great deal of attention and the attention wasn't distanced... For me, the way I looked at what was going on was a look of love and respect... I let her live her life in the middle of the frame... I let her be in her space. It's not uncontrolled. But the camera was not voyeuristic in the commercial way because you always knew where I was. You know, it wasn't shot through the keyhole.' Yet Akerman's point of view and framing also represent the director's control over the mother's every

movement – perhaps the will to omnipotence that motivates every child, but given Akerman’s mother’s refusal to speak about what must have seemed to be the most important thing in her past, the stakes were surely higher.

Janet Bergstrom, *Sight and Sound*, November 1999

JEANNE DIELMAN

23, QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES

Director: Chantal Akerman

Production Companies: Paradise Films, Unité 3, Ministère de la Culture

Producers: Evelyne Paul, Corinne Jenart

Assistant Directors: Marilyn Watelet, Serge Brodsky, Marianne de Muylder

Screenplay: Chantal Akerman

Director of Photography: Babette Mangolte

Editor: Patricia Canino

Assistant Editors: Catherine Huhardeaux, Martine Chicot

Art Director: Philippe Graff

Assistant Art Director: Jean-Pol Ferbus

Make-up: Eliane Marcus

Sound Recording: Benie Deswarte, Françoise van Thienen

Sound Re-recording: Jean-Paul Loublrier

Sound Editor: Alain Marchall

Cast

Delphine Seyrig (*Jeanne Dielman*)

Jan Decorte (*Sylvain Dielman*)

Henri Storck (*1st caller*)

Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (*2nd caller*)

Yves Bical (*3rd caller*)

Chantal Akerman (*voice of neighbour*)

Belgium/France 1975

201 mins

Restoration carried out from the original camera negative and in close collaboration with Chantal Akerman. Courtesy of the Royal Film Archive of Belgium – Cinematek.

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

Wed 1 Mar 18:00; Thu 2 Mar 18:50; Sat 11 Mar 18:50

Philosophical Screens: Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

Wed 1 Mar 21:30 Blue Room

Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon

Wed 1 Mar 20:50; Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+ intro)

Au hasard Balthazar

Thu 2 Mar 20:50; Mon 6 Mar 18:30

Taxi Driver

Thu 2 Mar 21:00 BFI IMAX; Fri 3 Mar 18:10; Mon 13 Mar 20:40

La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)

Fri 3 Mar 14:30; Sat 4 Mar 13:20; Sat 11 Mar 18:05

Persona

Fri 3 Mar 18:30; Thu 9 Mar 21:05

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)

Fri 3 Mar 20:30; Wed 8 Mar 20:30

Do the Right Thing

Fri 3 Mar 20:35; Sat 11 Mar 18:10

Singin' in the Rain

Fri 3 Mar 20:40; Thu 9 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Miles Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30

Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom)

Sat 4 Mar 15:30; Sun 5 Mar 10:30 BFI IMAX; Thu 9 Mar 20:50

Playtime

Sat 4 Mar 17:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:30

The Searchers

Sat 4 Mar 17:40; Tue 7 Mar 20:35

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)

Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40

Apocalypse Now: Final Cut

Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX

Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)

Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30

Shoah

Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35

The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc)

Sun 5 Mar 14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)

Citizen Kane

Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30

Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00

2001: A Space Odyssey

Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00

Vertigo

Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10

In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30

Late Spring (Banshun)

Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar 18:20

The Night of the Hunter

Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45

Mulholland Dr.

Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15

Beau Travail

Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King's College London)

Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)

Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50

The Godfather

Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

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