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By J. Hoberman

JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES. Written, directed, and produced by Chantal Akerman. Photographed by Babette Mangolte. Edited by Patricia Canino. Unite Trois.

THE CAMERA: JE (LA CAMERA: I). Directed, photographed, and produced by Babette Mangolte, at the Museum of Modern Art, October 16; at the Millennium, November 11.

CIA CASE OFFICER. Directed by Saul Landau. Photographed by Haskell Wexler. Produced by Ralph Stavins for the Institute for Policy Studies; CONTROLLING INTEREST: THE WORLD OF THE MULTINATIONAL CORPORATION. Directed by Larry Adleman. Produced by California Newsreel. BOTTLE BABIES. A film by Peter Krieg, released by Tricontinental Films. All three at the Film Forum, October 12-15, 19-22.

Reviewing Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, I feel like one of Kafka's messengers. The film is hardly an unknown masterpiece, having been highly praised in several American film journals, yet it's only been shown three times in New York City with no immediate prospects for commercial release. I finally caught it at the Bleecker Street's *Cahiers* series. Clearly, it's a great film, a brilliant collaboration between director-writer Akerman, cinematographer Babette Mangolte, and actress Delphine Seyrig. Akerman, a Belgian, only 25 when *Dielman* was made three years ago, calls it "the result of my research on form in the U.S.A. and on storytelling in Europe." Her use of duration, repetition, and light, invests the three-and-a-half hour film with a monumentality that's as suggestive of filmmakers like Michael Snow and Ernie Gehr as it is of Jean-Marie Straub and Marguerite Duras.

*Jean Dielmann* covers three days in the life of Seyrig, a bourgeois widow living a well-regulated existence with her teenage son. She supports her household by turning a trick each afternoon, and spends the rest of her time (virtually all of the film) cooking, shopping, and cleaning their flat. At first, Seyrig moves through her daily routine with self-possessed, meticulous grace. We become sufficiently immersed in her actions to realize that something's amiss just because she overcooks the potatoes. By the third afternoon, Seyrig's distress is evident. For the first time, the camera joins her in the bedroom with her client. They have sex, depicted in the film's only high-angle shot, then suddenly she stabs him in the heart with a pair of scissors. Seyrig spends the last seven minutes of the film seated in her immaculate living room as the afternoon light fades.

Mangolte's been quoted as calling *Jeanne Dielman* "a '40s story shot by a '70s camera," but it might have been shot by Vermeer. Akerman maximizes both the concreteness and abstraction of all the elements in the film. Almost as much as it is about anything, *Dielman* is about the quality of illumination. Seyrig is forever walking in and out of rooms switching lights on and off and our eyes grow accustomed to seeing the same compositions colored by different times of the day throughout the film. Meanwhile, Akerman has built up the soundtrack into a Bressonian symphony of clicks, splashes, and slams. As in Yasujiro Ozu's later work, the camera is low angled, static and always parallel to a wall. Akerman's geometry surpasses the orderliness of her character's life. Shots are orchestrated so that the camera setups slowly rotate around Seyrig as she progresses through her household tasks, which are often presented in real time. These rarely filmed activities become the action, the spectacle, with the luridly metaphoric murder necessary to break the spell of their hypnotic variations and end this remarkable tour-de-force.

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Babette Mangolte has not only worked on Akerman's films as a cinematographer but also on those of Yvonne Rainer, Michael Snow, and Richard Foreman. In *The Camera: Je*, as in her first directorial work *What Maisie Knew* (1975), she uses the idea of a "subjective" camera as her central device:

P. VAUTHEY/SYGMA

Seyrig as *Dielman*: Up against the illuminated wall

Here, she deals with her consciousness as a still photographer, and to do so she has married a movie camera to a still camera: Each time she takes a picture, we can see and hear the shutter snap closed. Besides the flow of life versus the photograph's frozen instant, there are a number of other polarities built into the film: Studio versus street, static versus hand-held, French versus English, and—less intentionally—good cinema versus poor cinema.

For its first 20 minutes, the film is quite extraordinary. We see a succession of people—some seductive, others uptight—seated against a backdrop as Mangolte guides them through the anxieties of having their picture taken. She is the personification of the camera's controlling gaze, altering the lighting or telling them where to look. The soundtrack (a mixture of sync and post-dubbed) offers both her thoughts and directions. The sequence exerts a chilly fascination. It's the opposite of the old Warhol films in which the absence of any direction combined with the camera's stare to break down performance into spontaneous behavior. Here behavior is reified. In tight close-up it's coaxed, molded, and supervised into a performance. The rest of *The Camera: Je* is shot outside. In long, hand-held sequences Mangolte careens through lower Manhattan, clicking off shot after shot of buildings against the sky (and at one point muttering, "I hate them! I hate them!" at a passing Friends of Cast Iron walking tour). It's a real miscalculation. The section is overlong and its recklessly recorded street scenes compare unhappily to the New York landscapes that she more rigorously observed for Akerman in *News from Home*.

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The Film Forum reopens this week with a trio of political documentaries. California Newsreel's *Controlling Interest* is the central panel in this triptych, a bruising expose of multinational corporations that rakes a bit too much muck for its 45-minute length. Hopscotching the hemisphere, the film debunks the Brazilian "economic miracle," recapitulates the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic and the 1973 rape of Chile. All this is interspersed with scenes in a small Massachusetts city about to be deserted for the sunbelt by the corporation that has dominated its economy for a century. Although the filmmakers don't make nearly enough of a break with the conventions of "informational" filmmaking, they do have some good visual ideas—a parade of annual report covers whose artwork offers ample proof of corporate megalomania.

The not-so-secret stars of the film are the various corporation executives interviewed throughout. Their shameless fealty to the profit motive and casual barbarisms couldn't be bettered by wooden dummies dandled on

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