

Document Citation

Title	"Jeanne Dielman": woman's work
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1983 Mar 29
Type	article
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Akerman, Chantal (1950-2018), Brussels, Belgium
Film Subjects	Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, Akerman, Chantal, 1975

the village

VOICE

VOL. XXVIII No. 13 THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF NEW YORK MARCH 29, 1983 90¢

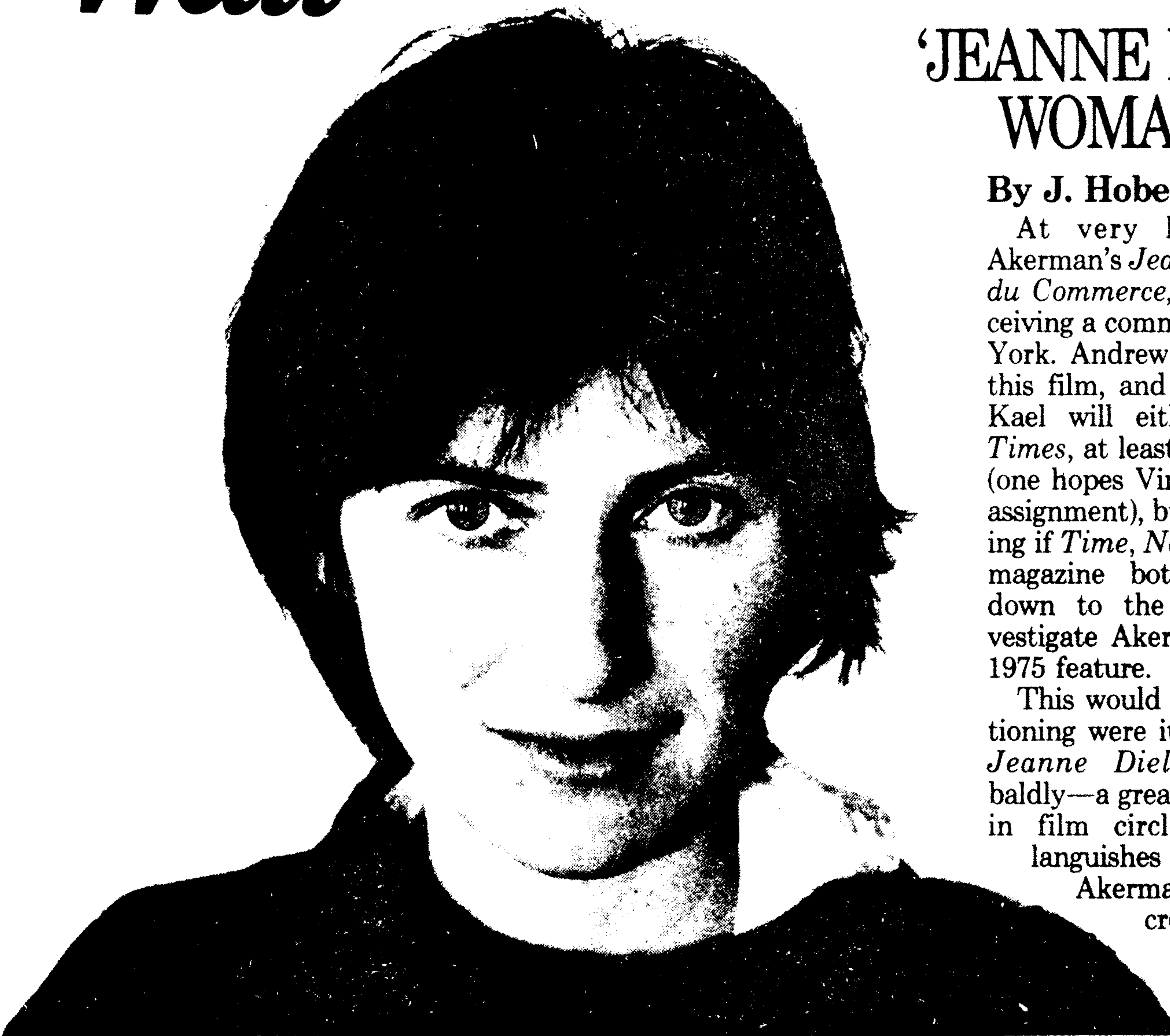
Up Against the Kitchen Wall

'JEANNE DIELMAN': WOMAN'S WORK

By J. Hoberman

At very long last, Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* is receiving a commercial opening in New York. Andrew Sarris isn't reviewing this film, and I doubt that Pauline Kael will either. *The New York Times*, at least, has to see the movie (one hopes Vincent Canby takes the assignment), but it'll be most surprising if *Time*, *Newsweek*, or *New York* magazine bother to send anyone down to the Film Forum to investigate Akerman's truly legendary 1975 feature.

This would hardly be worth mentioning were it not for the fact that *Jeanne Dielman* is—to put it baldly—a great movie and one which in film circles, at least, hardly languishes in obscurity. Made by Akerman (and an all-woman crew) when she was 25, *Jeanne Dielman* has
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Jeanne Dielman: Woman's Work

By J. Hoberman

JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES. Directed and written by Chantal Akerman. Produced by Paradise-Films (Brussels) and Unité Trois (Paris). At the Film Forum 1, through April 5.

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long been a touchstone for feminist film theorists. Indeed, with the possible exception of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Akerman has received more serious attention than any European director to make a reputation since Fassbinder. There's no point in cranking up the hype machine at this stage of the game. The movie's title at least should be familiar to even a casual reader of film journals, and, although ignored by the New York Film Festival, *Jeanne Dielman* has been screened in New York perhaps a half-dozen times over the last seven years at N.Y.U., the Bleecker Street Cinema, and the Museum of Modern Art.

The film, which runs nearly three and one-half hours, details a three-day stretch in the life of a compulsively organized, petit bourgeois Belgian widow (Delphine Seyrig)—a paradigm of efficiency who promptly scours the tub after bathing, finishes every morsel on her plate, doesn't even need a radio to keep her company, and turns one trick an afternoon to support herself and her teenage son. The operative word in the description is "details": Akerman makes a spectacle unique in film history out of Seyrig's daily chores—cleaning, folding, straightening, cooking, shopping, and fucking. By the middle of the movie, her routine is so familiar we know something's amiss merely because she forgets to place the cover on the soup tureen where she keeps her earnings. And when she overcooks the potatoes, we're being primed for the narrative's lurid denouement. The static, often symmetrical compositions are invariably presented from Akerman's eye level, with the camera usually placed parallel to the wall. In other words, Akerman's geometry surpasses even the orderliness of her protagonist's life. Shots are orchestrated so that the setups slowly rotate around Seyrig as she progresses through her household tasks, which are characteristically rendered in real time.

Seyrig was a kind of glorious abstraction in *Last Year at Marienbad* and even *India Song* (the two other post-1960 French-language masterpieces she graced with her presence); here, she inhabits her role so absolutely—even to the clumsiness of her potato-peeling—that she more than justifies the deliberate pedantry of the film's full title. Seyrig appears in virtually every shot. This in a film that goes beyond Ozu in eliminating camera movement, background music, fades, or optical effects. There is very little dialogue and, most extraordinarily, Akerman further eschews the classic rhythm of shot-countershot (reverse angles to show point of view) that French theorists say "sutures" the spectator to the screen.

Despite (and, of course, because of) its rigor, *Jeanne Dielman* is a supremely sensual film. Almost as much as it's about anything, this is a movie about the quality of recorded light and sound. Babette Mangolte's unlit cinematography is exceptionally fine, and Seyrig is forever walking in and out of rooms switching fixtures on and off while our eyes grow accustomed to savoring the same spaces as differently illuminated during the course of the day. At the same time, Akerman builds up the sound track into a little symphony of clicks, splashes, and slams. *Jeanne Dielman* is as monumental a formal film as Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*; Akerman's landscape, however, is radically other. Seyrig's slow-motion breakdown, her leap into an abyss beyond the kitchen sink, packs an emo-

tional wallop entirely different from the products of earlier (mainly male) avant-gardes.

The Belgian-born and based Akerman lived in New York in 1972, at the moment when "structural" film was at the height of its local prestige. The lessons of pre-Morrissey Warhol—the power of duration, the effect of monotony, the wonder of people simply "having," as the Hindus say, "their being"—had only recently been absorbed, while the impact of *Wavelength's* overdetermined narrative structure was still fresh and immediate. Assimilating Warhol and Snow, Akerman made their discoveries the vehicle for her own interests, using their formalism to produce one of the most absolutely lucid movies ever made.

Obviously, *Jeanne Dielman* has its European precursors as well. The best

Dielman is the film that changed the face of contemporary European cinema. Its imprint is manifest in such feminist polemics as Wollen and Mulvey's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (not to mention the two most overtly feminist films in this year's "New Directors," *A Question of Silence* and *Dirty Dishes*); its strategies appear in the two finest European films made after 1975 by men about women, Zolt Kézdi-Kovács's *When Joseph Returns* and Peter Handke's *The Left-Handed Woman*.

In New York, *Jeanne Dielman's* first audience was mainly Akerman's acquaintances on the local avant-garde film scene, and many of their responses were less than enthusiastic. (Jonas Mekas and Amy Taubin, for example, both wrote severely mixed reviews in the *Soho News*, criticizing the film for being too conventional.) In California, by contrast, the reception was

her other films) as "feminist." Yet no other movie in recent years has so bluntly hyperbolized western woman's traditional lot. On the other hand, *Jeanne Dielman* is also a work which lends itself to a multiplicity of readings. Until its climax, for example, this is a film where sex is something that happens behind closed doors—in great measure, *Jeanne Dielman* is a movie about representing what can't be shown, what can't even be felt.

Then too, the film is a lethal travesty of melodrama—a deadpan resurrection of the ultimate weepie plot—using a situation that was a chestnut when Mizoguchi (or even Ruth Chatterton) discovered it. In affect, *Jeanne Dielman* resembles late Hitchcock, but what Hitch uses to set the table, Akerman turns into virtually the entire film. As in *Psycho* or *The Birds*, Akerman reveals the sinister in the com-



Chez Jeanne Dielman: a rigorous, sensual spectacle of the quotidian unique in film history

FILM

Akerman designs films that interrogate the march of time in the form of narrative, playing with audience desire, thwarting even the most humble expectations, and providing an entirely unprecedented sort of pleasure.

known is Straub-Huillet's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, but there's also the Hamburg-based avant-gardist Hellmuth Costard's *Die Unterdrückung der Frau ist vor allen an dem Verhalten der Frauen Selben* ("The Oppression of Woman is Primarily Evident in the Behavior of Women Themselves"), an hour-long depiction of a male hippie doing a housewife's chores. But whether Akerman was inspired, influenced, or just anticipated by Costard is a moot point. *Jeanne*

warmer. Berkeley-based *Film Quarterly* put the film on its cover in 1977, while, from the vantage point of San Diego, Manny Farber and Patricia Patterson wrote a long, brilliant appreciation for *Film Comment*. The film has long since entered the academic canon, the subject of substantial exegeses in *Camera Obscura*, *The Quarterly Journal of Film Studies*, and elsewhere.

Akerman has always resisted characterization of *Jeanne Dielman* (or any of

monplace, but she does so to a far more astute social purpose. Finally, the movie's climax—which is that, literally—suggests something perhaps fundamental about the relation of narrative to both male and female sexuality.

At once spectacle and antispectacle, *Jeanne Dielman* not only criticizes the dominant mode of representing women but challenges the dominant mode of representation itself. As Farber and Patterson put it, back in 1977: "The Akerman revelation is a political thrust against the box-office hype of the straight press, which has convinced audiences that it needs Vito Corleones, Johnny Guitars, or Carries, constant juicing, dramatic rises and falls for its satisfaction."

With *Stalker*, *Time Stands Still*, *Parsifal*, *When Joseph Returns*, and *The Constant Factor* all opening here recently, this has been a remarkable winter for European releases. I said I'd rest the hype machine and I meant it. Still, here's something for the ads: if you see only one supposedly "difficult" movie—ach, make that only one movie—this year, see *Jeanne Dielman*.