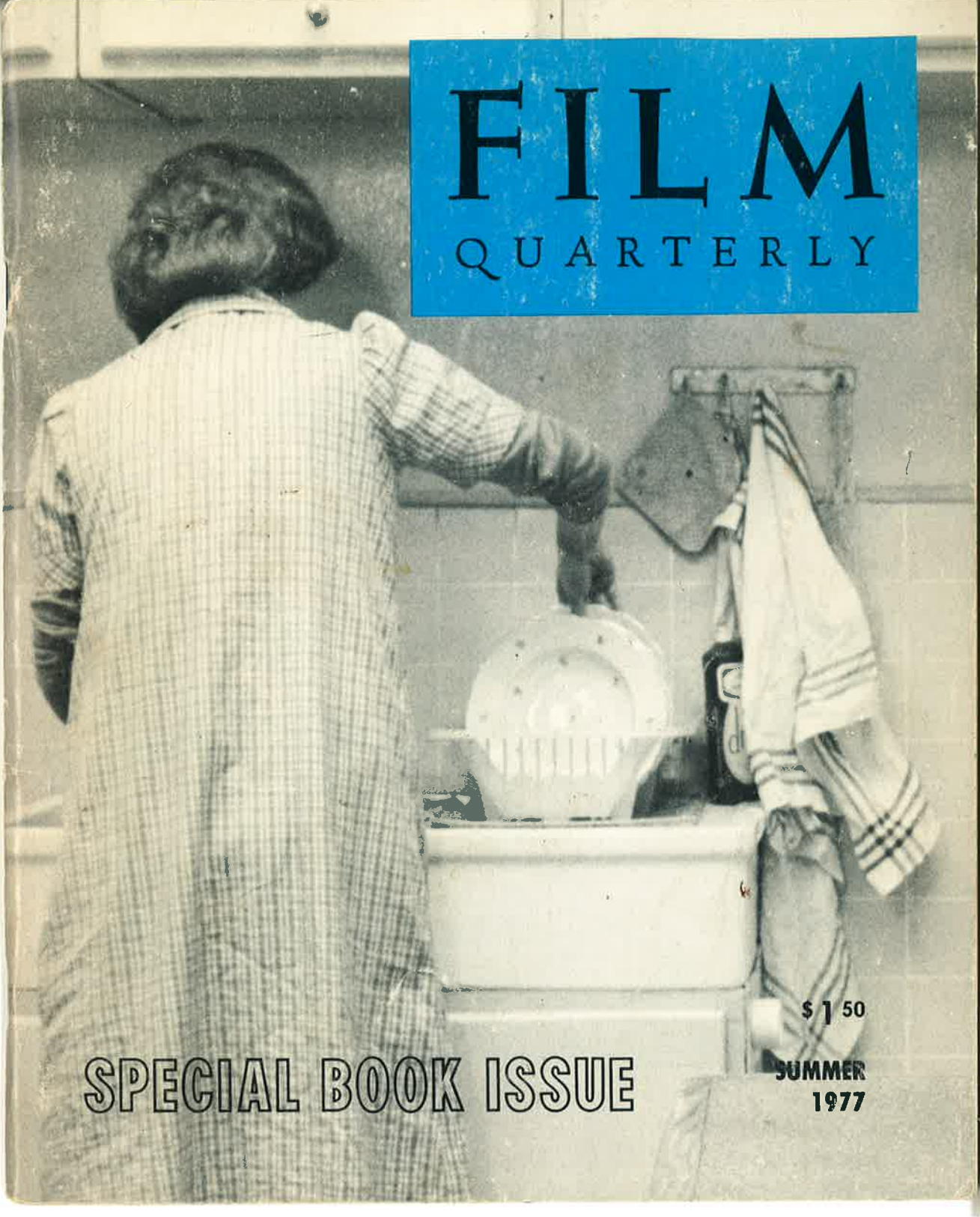

FILM QUARTERLY

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SPECIAL BOOK ISSUE

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COVER: Delphine Seyrig in Akerman's *Jeanne Dielmann:* "the thousands of familiar moves that comprise a woman's life."

Editor's Notebook

PERIODICALS

Cinema Papers (143 Therry St., Melbourne, Victoria, 3000, Australia, $7.60 per year) is a general-interest film magazine, with articles on various aspects of world film plus specialized Australian material.

The Australian Journal of Screen Theory (University of New South Wales, Box 1, Kensington, NSW 2033, Australia, $12.00 per year for two issues) addresses theoretical problems through studies of actual films, "avoiding an undue emphasis on metatheory." First issue deploys methodology of "genetic structuralism" on Lang and Godard.

NUMERO DEUX

Apologies to Jonathan Rosenbaum, whose *Sight & Sound* piece (Spring 1976) I quoted in my review in *FQ* (Winter 1976–77), thinking that I was quoting objectively from the film. The film never explicitly states that Sandrine is an "electric factory with charges and discharges, producing babies and meals; or a spectacle to look at, a part of society." These are Mr. Rosenbaum's words.

STAN SCHWARTZ

TANNER ADDENDUM

Readers interested in the work of Alain Tanner and John Berger may wish to consult two interviews from which quotes were drawn in the review of *Jonah* in our last issue: "Irony Is a Double-Edged Weapon," *Cineaste,* Vol. VI, No. 4 (by Lenny Rubinstein) and "Alain Tanner Makes His Films on the Enemy's Field," S. F. *Chronicle,* Oct. 24, 1976 (by Bernard Weiner).

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MARSHA KINDER

Reflections on "JEANNE DIELMAN"

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce—1080 Bruxelles (1975) is the most important film to première at this year's Filmex and the best feature that I have ever seen made by women. Starring Delphine Seyrig in the title role, the film was written, directed, and produced by Chantal Akerman (who was only 25 at the time), photographed by Babette Mangolte, and edited by Patricia Canino. Akerman belongs among that select group of filmmakers—including Welles, Bertolucci, and Fassbinder—who have created a boldly original, highly crafted masterpiece while still in their twenties.

Like many other current films focusing on women, *Jeanne Dielman* does not present a strong, positive female protagonist; Jeanne is a bourgeois widow trapped in meaningless social rituals that ultimately cause her to commit a desperate, insane act. Yet, by developing a style that is so innovative, Akerman totally transforms the material—over three and a half hours devoted to mundane gestures without any camera movement or close-ups whatsoever. When I interviewed her at Filmex, she said:

> You can't tell what effect a film will have, to show the trap may bring a revolt. I don't know the alternative. The important thing is the style, the form. It shows everybody has conditioning. The attention I show to this woman's gestures is very positive, to show that someone doing the dishes can also be used for art, that is positive.

Akerman's unconventional style expresses a feminine perspective and sensibility. More than any other film-maker, she makes us realize how previous films have been almost totally restricted to a male point of view. Despite the limitations of her character Jeanne, Akerman and her female crew provide a radical feminine perspective that enriches our perception of the world. Delphine Seyrig, who also was present at Filmex, felt this contrast very intensely.

> In this role I experienced the things I've been trying to get away from all my life. What was most difficult for me was *not* to express any revolt or aggression. As I became Jeanne Dielman, I realized how easy it is to be a woman like that. Women are very malleable, they all play roles, not just actresses; they adapt more easily than men do. I felt this experience has never been shown before. No man could have made this film; it is a totally feminine film.

Unlike her heroine, Chantal Akerman has successfully rebelled against the traps laid for a Belgian bourgeoise. Born in Brussels in 1950, she developed her artistic ambitions quite young. At fifteen when she saw Godard's *Pierrot le Fou,* she decided to become a film-maker. By seventeen she began studying directing and photography at the INSAS, a professional high school. Following the '68 riots, she went to Paris, where she attended the International University Theater. The radical influences are already strong in her first experimental shorts: *Saute Ma Ville (Blow Up My City),* 1969, and *The Loved Child,* 1971. In 1972 she lived in New York's East Village, where she was influenced by East Coast experimental film-making, which is apparent in her next group of films: *Hotel Monterrey,* 1972; *The Room 15 x 18,* 1972; and *Hanging Out in Yonkers,* 1973.

> I saw the films of Michael Snow and Jonas Mekas—they opened my mind to many things—the relationship between film and your body, time as the most important thing in film, time and energy. Seeing their films gave me courage to try something else, not just to make money. Before I went to New York, say in 1968, I thought Bergman and Fellini were the greatest film-makers. Not any more, because they are not dealing with time and space as the most important elements in film.

When she returned to Europe, she directed her first dramatic feature, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle,* 1974, a semi-autobiographical film about the people she had met on three trips. Although this film did very well

Delphine Seyrig and Jan Decorte in JEANNE DIELMANN

in Paris, none of her work has been distributed in this country.*

According to Akerman, *Jeanne Dielman* was "the result of my research, on form in the USA and on story-telling in Europe." She takes her expanded consciousness home to Brussels and concentrates it on the narrowest of subjects—a woman from her mother's generation who is trapped in the very conventions that Akerman has escaped. She admits:

> I didn't escape from my mother. This is a love film to my mother. It gives recognition to that kind of woman, it gives her "a place in the sun."

It is her first film to use a conventional plot or linear structure, yet she transforms them into a means of expressing a radical vision. Earlier she had written another script about a woman in her forties, but was dissatisfied.

> In 1973 I worked on a script with a friend of mine, but it was too explanatory—it didn't come from within myself. I got money to do it, but after awhile I realized it was not good. One night, the whole film came to me in one second. I suppose it came from my memories of all the women in my childhood, from my unconscious. I sat down and wrote it with no hesitation, no doubts. The same was true when I made the film. I did it like a bulldozer. You can feel it in the film. I knew exactly what to shoot and where to put the camera.

The film covers three days in the life of an attractive widow living with her son (played by Jan Decorte). It focuses on the banalities of common experience that absorb the time and energy of the average middle-class woman—shopping for food, cooking a meal, dusting the furniture, brushing her hair, cleaning her body and her bathtub. These repetitive rituals that fill her empty life and help maintain her sanity are the same kinds of actions documented by Anna Wulf in a chapter of Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*. In the case of Jeanne Dielman, one of these daily habits is sleeping with a man for money; but, in the context of her life, it is no more significant than any of the other rituals. Within the repetitiveness of the pattern, she arranges for minimal variations: each day of the week, she serves a different kind of meat, fixes the potatoes in a different way, and is fucked by a different man. The film explores what happens when the routine is violated. One day she gets up too

*Her latest feature *News from Home* will be shown for the first time at Cannes.

early, she misbuttons her robe, she drops a spoon, she makes the coffee too strong, she leaves soap on one of her plates, she can't match a button, she leaves a pair of scissors out of place. These minor deviations are combined with too many unsettling surprises: a stamp machine is empty, she receives a disappointing birthday gift, she is rejected by a crying infant. As a result of these disruptions, she has an orgasm and commits a murder.

The film explores the relationship between identity and action. If a woman is what she does, then why is it that movies never show us the thousands of familiar moves that comprise a woman's life? Trapped in the passive roles defined by the culture, women perform actions that are considered boring and non-dramatic—except for having sex, giving birth, or going mad. In male-dominated action films, women are either passive sex objects or destructive sirens, victims or maniacs, mothers or whores. Jeanne is all of these things, yet these actions and roles do not define her adequately or completely. A more conventional film would focus on Jeanne primarily as a murderer or a prostitute, but the structure that Akerman uses prevents us from doing so. In understanding and judging her as a human being, we are forced to take into consideration all of the details that are ordinarily omitted from movies because it is precisely these banalities that explain her desperation and violence.

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 unrealistic 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. It also accentuates the central problem of boredom: Jeanne is not terrified by "Time's winged chariot," but by the "vast deserts of eternity" that threaten to engulf her. On the morning when she awakens too early, the day stretches before her like an empty chasm; she repeatedly runs to the clock in a panic as if to make the hours pass more quickly, but these desperate motions only slow things down. Ordinarily, she copes with this problem in two ways: by dividing and patterning her time, and by trying to anticipate every move, but this makes her less capable of dealing with anything new or unpredictable. Akerman's style follows the same strategy and, as a result, it heightens the impact of every surprise.

The film is divided into three parts, like three stages in a ritual that are set off by titles ("the end of the first day," "the end of the second day"). After the first cycle, we learn the rituals and recognize the ways in which Jeanne anticipates her next move—laying a fresh towel out on the bed for her daily customer, buying wool before she runs out of it in her knitting, frugally switching lights on and off as she moves through the rooms of her apartment, saving the flour left over from breading the veal, always knowing who is at the door.

We also learn to anticipate the habits of the camera. On the second day, as she stands in her kitchen wearing her apron and hears the doorbell, we recognize that this is an exact repetition of the opening scene. She moves at the same pace; and predictably, the camera is in the same position when she reaches the door. Only the clothes have been changed: she wears a different blouse and is handed a different coat and hat. We know that we are not going to see the sex; instead, we anticipate that the next shot will be of the hallway, the lights will dim to indicate the passing of time, then she and her customer will emerge fully clothed from the bedroom, and he will say at the door, "See you next Thursday," and she will receive the same amount of money and will put it in the china dish on her dining room table. Yet she is disturbed by this encounter. We know this because she burns the potatoes and disrupts her schedule. Even the editing is affected. In later scenes, we enter at a slightly more advanced stage in the ritual; of Thursday's bath, we see only the cleaning of the tub.

Because time is so central in establishing the order, the disruptions are first experienced as a violation of sequence and a gradual acceleration of pace both in the editing and in Jeanne's movements. As the panic grows, her motions become more ragged and abrupt, her breathing quickens, she slams doors and cabinets a little too hard.

When her Friday customer rings, she is not preparing dinner in her kitchen as usual but is unwrapping an ugly pink nightgown from her sister in Canada. Despite the slowness of the day, she has been caught unaware, and must stuff the garment back in the box and hide the package under the bed, lay the scissors on the dresser, and hurry to the door. We are similarly surprised by the camerawork and editing. The film cuts directly to a new subject at a new angle, something we never expected to see—the sex scene. Jeanne sits in front of the bedroom mirror, methodically removing her blouse; the sound of a cough informs us that her customer is present. Then in an overhead shot, we witness Jeanne lying on her back impassively staring at the ceiling while the man lies on top of her, breathing heavily. In slow cycles, she blinks her eyes and opens and closes her right hand. His breathing accelerates, and so does hers, as she loses control. Frantically trying to push him away, she writhes on the bed and covers her face with the quilt. Then she quiets down; a mysterious smile mixed with disgust moves across her face, and she tries to push him away. Her composure restored, she silently dresses as he watches her in the mirror. When he lies back on the bed, we continue to watch Jeanne in the mirror as she slowly finishes dressing, casually picks up the scissors on the dresser, then lunges at his throat. The murder is followed by an extremely long take of Jeanne sitting immobile at the dining room table in the dark, with bloodstains on her hands and the collar of her white blouse, her image reflected in the highly polished wood. The only movement is the reflection of outside lights flashing on the china closet and the sounds of passing traffic. In Seyrig's words, "she falls back into a lack of expression; I felt there was nothing more she could express." Gradually Jeanne begins to drop her head, then lifts it, smiles mysteriously and shuts her eyes. The film ends with this image fading to a comfortable dark blue.

The full title of the film immediately tells us that Jeanne Dielmann 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 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.

Akerman's visual treatment of space is very radical. She describes it as "essentialist and very stylized, distanced and warm." There are no close-ups; the camera never moves. The few outdoor shots are usually wide-angle; indoors, there are only medium shots. The camera relentlessly remains fixed in one spot, revealing a comfortable space that characters enter and abandon. While Bresson uses a similar technique in *Une Femme Douce,* his static camera was associated with the point of view of the husband, who entrapped his wife and drove her to suicide; here, Akerman links it to the feminine condition that has been imposed by the entire society. Yet, like Anais Nin, she also recognizes and develops the positive resources of this perspective. Not only are the colors and compositions soothing (the pastel blues and greens and pale yellows in the kitchen, the aqua tones of Jeanne's coat and the matching shutters in front of the shoemaker shop, the solidity of the cherrywood wardrobe, the symmetrical division of the screen between Jeanne knitting in the dining room and her son reading in the living room), but our long exposure to these sharply focused images allows us to appreciate their nuances.

This mode of perception expands our consciousness and leads us to a Jamesian form of realism.

> The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience.*

Akerman cultivates the unseen. In her own words, "to say the most, you show the least." There are no flashbacks to the past, just a few photographs always seen at a distance. Except for a walk around the block and a few shopping expeditions, Jeanne and the camera are confined to the small apartment; the outside world must be perceived by

*Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine* (1884).

means of flickering shadows on the walls and furniture and traffic noises that filter into her narrow life. We never see the sister in Canada though we judge her from her letter and gifts and from Jeanne's reactions. We never see the son's friend Yan, though he is frequently mentioned. We never see the mother who brings her infant to Jeanne, though we hear her voice (which is actually Chantal Akerman's). We must wait until the second day to see the baby; on the first day, we see only his pink booties. We must wait till the third day to see the sexual encounter.

The most important omission is the access to what is going on inside of Jeanne's mind—there are no voice-overs, no soliloquies, no subjective inserts, and minimal dialogue. We see only her external surface and, if we are to understand her behavior and her experience, we must "guess the unseen from the seen." We learn to recognize subtle signs—a stray lock of hair and the quickening of her step. When Jeanne is silent and alone, we watch her sitting in a comfortable chair, breathing faster than usual and shifting her eyes more rapidly; we know she is trying desperately to think of something to do. She pops up suddenly and goes to dust the furniture before slumping back into a dangerous lethargy. Later, as the panic worsens, she sits rigidly in a chair, her muscles tightening as we watch her in a very long take; finally, she raises a finger, as if she has thought of something to do, but then drops it as if she has rejected that idea. Immediately her breathing grows more rapid and her anxiety more intense.

Delphine Seyrig gives a brilliant performance; she is always fascinating to watch even when she is frozen and impassive. Not since Liv Ullmann in Bergman's *Persona* or Falconetti in Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* has an actress had such a difficult role that demands such a range of subtle expressiveness from her face and body. Both Seyrig and Akerman would delight Béla Balázs by the forceful way they recover and advance the language of gesture and facial expression. Seyrig goes far beyond any of her previous performances, perhaps because she is so totally committed to the film's radical vision.

> I think it's a very important film—a new step forward—not just for me, but for the history of film-making. I usually take an interest in the form or style of the films I act in; yet I realize that as an actress, I've been expressing things that are not my own, but others'. I feel a much greater involvement in this film. It's not a coincidence that Chantal asked me to do it. It's not just being an actress, but acting within a context that means something to me personally. This never happened to me before. In the past I was always able to bring something I liked to the part I was playing, something between the lines. But now I feel I don't have to hide behind a mask, I can be my own size. It changes acting into action, what it was meant to be.

The opportunity of working with a predominantly female crew also influenced her performance.

> I have become aware how inhibiting it is to be watched on a set mostly by men. A woman is a foreigner in an all-male world—the film industry. I wanted to be surrounded by women in this part so that I wouldn't behave in any way other than I would as Jeanne Dielman. There is a difference in the way you walk when you are in a room full of men rather than a room full of women—you don't undress the same way, wash the same way, or brush your hair the same way. It is important that I be looked at by women while working.

The creation of Jeanne is a harmonious collaboration between Seyrig and Akerman.

Jeanne's interactions with other characters are frequently nonverbal but always highly revealing. On the third day when she tries to cuddle the baby, the infant senses her anxiety and begins to cry. Frustrated by the rejection, Jeanne takes revenge on the baby's mother by taking longer than usual to answer the door and by cutting off conversation. Later, when she goes to a restaurant for coffee, she finds another woman sitting in her usual place. While Jeanne takes the next table, the camera remains in its former position. Upset by the deviation in the routine, Jeanne asks for the usual waitress. That's the only dialogue in the scene. Yet, we learn a great deal by observing the two women—Jeanne looking vacantly and distractedly around the room and leaving abruptly, while the other woman smokes, reads, writes, and observes Jeanne critically. The other woman would be defined by her culture as more masculine both in behavior and appearance; yet she clearly has her own center and a life that is not empty like Jeanne's. We *see* that not all women in Brussels are caught in the same trap.

Akerman also cultivates the unheard; the film is practically silent. Yet, as in Japanese theater, the silence gives greater impact to the sounds that are present: the cabinets snapping open and shut, the whistling kettle, the grinding of the coffee, the sloshing of the meat as it is molded into a loaf, the crying infant, and the incessant traffic and elevator motor always audible in the background.

The dialogue is minimal. Yet at irregular intervals, there are outbursts of talk, long monologues that are highly revealing. On the first day, Jeanne reads a letter from her sister encouraging her to find a new husband and inviting her and her son to vacation in Canada. Then just before going to sleep, the son, who still longs for some romance, unexpectedly asks her how she met his father. Jeanne replies with a narrative that is full of ironic contrasts. Her sister's meeting and marrying of an American soldier in 1944 was an unexpected "miracle." She embraced the new, but Jeanne remained in the familiar pattern. She wanted children and was told that marriage was the thing to do. When her fiancé's business went bad, her aunts opposed the match, arguing that a pretty girl like her could find a man who would make her life easy. She did not break the engagement, but stuck with her original plan. We surmise that she is now following her aunt's advice with her daily customers. It makes little difference to her whether she is a wife or a prostitute; in either role, she has been trained to use sex for the same economic purpose. Her son cannot understand how she could make love to a man who is ugly or whom she didn't love. Her response is simple: "Making love is merely a detail . . . How would you know, you're not a woman."

On the second day, when the mother picks up her baby, she tells a long comical saga about her attempts to vary her routine by copying other women at the butcher shop. The woman can make no decisions and cannot cope with change. While Jeanne remains practically mute and impassive, we soon learn, when she tries to answer her sister about the proposed trip to Canada, that she suffers precisely the same indecisiveness. The son's second bedtime monologue is more threatening than the first. He begins by describing his friend Yan's sexual experience with a nurse and then reveals his own Oedipal feelings. As a child, he was disturbed by the idea of his father hurting Jeanne, using his penis like a sword. He wanted his father to die and then had nightmares. Jeanne cuts him off, refusing to listen; but she is obviously disturbed and shares his negative view of sex.

Delphine Seyrig as Jeanne Dielmann

On the third day, while going from store to store searching for a missing button on her son's jacket, which was a gift from her sister several years ago, Jeanne suddenly delivers a long complaint against her sister, which helps to explain why the birthday gift is so upsetting. In fact, all of her sister's intrusions into her life are disturbing because they are unpredictable. The shopkeeper offers a way of coping with the problem of the missing button: "Get all new buttons, it'll look new. It's the same as going to the hairdresser." Although this solution is superficial, it is still too threatening for Jeanne, who is incapable of handling anything new. She clings to her routine and rejects the idea of new buttons or a new husband because it would be "too hard to get used to someone new." She has trained her son to become just like his father; her customers "fill in" for her dead husband both sexually and financially. In fact, the man she murders resembles her husband in the photograph on the dresser. Jeanne solves her problem, not by turning to the new, but by killing the old. Akerman insists:

> It's the logical end to what was going on before; it's neither positive nor negative, it just is. The murder is on the same level as all the other Freudian slips that happen after the visit of the second client.

Yet, as Seyrig points out, it's "the only time that Jeanne ever took a stand, or expressed revolt in any way." It is the only decisive action she takes.

The emotional impact of *Jeanne Dielman* is very powerful because we are forced to experience it phenomenologically in an unusual way. We must adapt to its unconventional style by going through several stages. At first, the routines and rhythms seem strange, frustrating, or even comical. We wait for something dramatic to happen; we wonder when the pace will quicken or when the camera will move. Some people in the audience grow impatient and walk out, particularly those like Jeanne who cannot tolerate the new. Those who remain begin to realize that the entire film will move at this slow pace, that it is establishing new conventions. We alter our expectations, relax, and gradually become absorbed by the images and physically attuned to the rhythm. In many of the long takes, we can let our eyes wander freely within the frame, observing details that we would never notice in a more conventional movie; we have time to think about what is happening or not happening. Our participation becomes more active; we begin to feel in control. Increasingly, we feel at home with the familiar shots and slow pace. Whereas earlier we welcomed any visitor or outdoor scene, eventually we come to resent them as intrusions. On the third day, we're glad to see the noisy baby leave and we're relieved when Jeanne shuts the door on the mother. We are vaguely upset by the acceleration of the pace and the minor deviations. We are very disturbed by the sex and violence, which many of us in the audience at first hoped for, but which we now experience as highly disruptive. Like Jeanne, we are relieved to return to the immobility of the final shot. Of course, when the film is over, unlike Jeanne, we are released from the trap; yet our own susceptibility to the routines and resistance to the new have been demonstrated. We have experienced the trap from the inside and, as a result, our own perception and consciousness have been expanded. The film makes us see our own daily routines in a new way; it leads us to re-examine the relationship between our identity and our actions. Most important, it makes us more receptive to what is new and liberating in our experience.

UMBERTO ECO

De interpretatione,

or the difficulty of being Marco Polo

[On the occasion of Antonioni's China film]

What happened in Venice last Saturday fell somewhere between science fiction and comedy *all' Italiana* with a dash of western. In the wagon ring, desperately resisting, were Ripa di Meana and the Venice Biennal Exposition officials. Around them galloped Chinese diplomats, the Italian foreign minister, the Italian embassy in Peking, the Italian-Chinese Association, the police, firemen and other Sinophiles. The story is noteworthy: China was protesting the imminent showing of Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo* at the Fenice. The Italian government had done everything possible to prevent the showing, the Venice Biennal Exposition had resisted in the name of the right to information and to artistic expression; at the last moment the Venetian prefect, coming to the aid of Peking, discovered that the Fenice was unusable as a movie hall (after having done nothing