



The Female Writing of Quiet and Profound: Chantal Akerman's Films in the Perspective of Feminism

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Abstract. As one of the most important feminist film directors in the twentieth century, the works *Je, tu, il, elle*; *Jeanne Dielman*, and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* during the seventies by Chantal Akerman all presented a similar kernel on the expression of feminism and have influenced many of the filmmakers throughout the world. Nowadays, feminist films have developed constantly during the past decades and many of them became the new classical model. However, feminism in Chantal Akerman's film still glittering in our generation now due to its unique historical position. Its significance will not be diminished in a foreseeable future. This article introduces contemporary film theory and the feminist movement in the 1960s as context and some related feminist film criticism theory, which is used as a tool to analyze the 3 works that were mentioned at the level of text. Moreover, some interpretations and critical perspectives of feminist film in new are also provided.

Keywords: Chantal Akerman · Feminist film · Jeanne Dielman

1 Introduction

1.1 French New Wave and Chantal Akerman

After World War II, the once glorious European film industry began to rebuild and innovate from the ruins of war. European films began to show its unique aesthetic characteristics again just after the Italy New-realism Films as a reforming pioneer. From the 1940s to the 1950s, Andre Bazin, a French film theorist, who highly praised the aesthetic style of Italy's New-realism Films, put forward a series of original aesthetic propositions based on realism films that he had watched before. These ideas, together with the magazine *Cahiers Du Cinema* he established, became the essential origin of the French New Wave.

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B. Majoul et al. (Eds.): ICLAHD 2022, ASSEHR 726, pp. 408–415, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8_52

The series of films in the French New Wave is often summarized as “anti-tradition”, “anti- Hollywood” and other characteristics. The most profound impact on modern and contemporary films is the breakthrough made by these films in shooting methods, narrative rhythm, visual style, and so on, which points out another possibility beyond the dramatic Hollywood film style.

As a young French director in the post-new wave era, the film style of Chantal Akerman had been greatly influenced by French New Wave, which is especially evident in her three feature films in the 1970s. Meanwhile, as another lingering label on Ackerman, Feminism is one of the core elements of her film temperament for a deep concern for female situations in real life is often reflected in her films.

1.2 Chantal Akerman and Her Work Introduction

Chantal Akerman graduated from the Higher Film Academy in Paris. After watching Godard’s *Pierrot le fou* at the age of 15, she decided to make her film. She has made several short and feature films in France, Belgium, and the United States. What affected her more was the narrative skills of European art films after World War II and the anxious, chaotic, decadent but passionate era at that time. Her works focus on depicting the accidental encounters and accidents of women. She regards women’s work, love, and desire as long-term concerns. Her films explore multiple narrative structures and have made various types of films (documentaries, musicals, diaries, etc.)

The significance of Chantal Akerman is to Belgian cinema just like what Agnès Varda, the mother of the New Wave, is to French cinema. She is one of the most prominent female directors in the 1970s European art and avant-garde film industry. In 1971, while Europe was still basking in the glow of the embers of the New Wave, Chantal Akerman was in New York to get to know American experimental film and develop her unique style. In 1974, she wrote, directed, and starred in her first feature film *Je, tu, il, elle*. She used monologue, communication, and naked flesh to present three unrelated experiences of one woman. In 1975, in her 201-min drama *Jeanne Dielman*, she used a large number of long, fixed shots to show in extreme detail the real life of a woman who had multiple identities. In the domestic space, she routinely expressed the plight of women’s survival and the current situation of life in the social context of that time, breaking the confines of the male gaze [1]. Besides, *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* used long conversations and open spaces to show women’s self-expression. It was a formal extension of *Je, tu, il, elle*, and the opposite of *Jeanne Dielman* in its representation of time and space.

1.3 Innovation

As a milestone figure in feminist films, people taking film studies have focused more attention on Chantal Ackerman’s work of *Jeanne Dielman*. Meanwhile, *Je, tu, il, elle*, and *Les rendez-vous d’Anna*, two other films by Akerman in the 1970s, may not be as innovative as *Jeanne Dielman* in terms of form and structure, and they are not as radical as the latter in their expression. However, they can still be regarded as a whole kernel about women in daily life. The feminist core of Ackerman’s works could be better revealed by conducting a specific comparative analysis of these three films. We have noticed that this attempt is not common in many types of research on Ackerman and feminist films.

Some new perspectives on Ackermann's works and feminist films can be also provided through the specific analysis of these three closely related films.

2 Feminist Film Criticism Theory

2.1 Contemporary Film Theory and Feminist Movement

Following the film theorists such as Bazin and Krakauer, in the 1960s, film theory got a more modern and scientific development - *Film: Language or Speaks*, written by the French scholar Metz, marked the birth of Film Semiotics. Compared with the relationship between films and human society, the semiotic research on movies had shifted more to film context and the relationship between films and audiences. The emergence of Film Semiotics in the 1960s not only opened up a new field of film studies but also widened its boundaries of it. Since then, film theory has become an interdisciplinary and comprehensive system. The film, not only as an art but also as a cultural phenomenon, has more and more entered the vision of scholars.

The world feminist movement also ushered in several new climaxes in the United States during the 1960s. In her 1948 *sex*, Beauvoir had already pointed out the injustice between males and females in social rights and the oppression of the former of the latter. In her book *Second Sex* [2], feminists made a more political and cultural criticism of this phenomenon: women are not only exploited in the material world, but also always in a passive position in culture. In view of politics, some radical feminist organizations emerged in the United States during the 1960s, putting forward several slogans such as "personal is political" [3]. Because of culture, feminist literary theory was put forward. The book *Sex Politics* written by Kate Millett in the late 1960s showed that feminism at this time "has become a highly significant and active movement with a clear self-awareness" [4]. Since then, female exploitation in literary texts has been revealed and explored more than before as a long-standing phenomenon.

2.2 Feminist Film Criticism Theory

Most feminist movies are designed to satisfy the image of women in the eyes of men. Often the types of women created in movies are the ideal female image imagined by men, and they don't care about the real female images in reality. Most of the women who can attract men in movies are actresses coming out of luxury cars or accompanied by luxury cars. Men don't watch real women but view women as they watch luxury cars. Here, women are not women but are appreciated by men as commodities. Those beautiful and mysterious female images have also become the object that most male audiences want to achieve. As far as we know, feminist film critics are represented by Murvi, Gredhill, and others. These female film critics agree that the language of the previous film is a product of patriarchal society, especially traditional mainstream films led by Hollywood. There is serious discrimination between men and women, that is, gender discrimination. Polarization is formed in the film: one is an active male and the other is a passive female. These are all shown in Hollywood movies and what we usually see. Generally, in the process of watching movies, men's eyes play a decisive role. In

the film, women are regarded as a “strange scene”. From beginning to end, women are just objects to be seen and displayed like commodities [5]. At the center of mainstream Hollywood movies, women are also excluded. They are encoded as images with strong visual charm and pornographic appeal and turned into materialized images to meet the subconscious desires of the audience.

2.3 The Portrayal of Women in the Classic Hollywood Film System

In the study of cinematic gaze theory, the representative figure Laura Mulvey, in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, focuses on classic Hollywood film narrative strategies and discusses the patriarchal centrism in classic film narratives. She argues that cinema provides voyeuristic pleasure [6]. While most women in cinema are under the male gaze, women lose their autonomy and independence. They gradually become the objects of male prying eyes.

In the classic Hollywood film system, most films often ignore the objective presence of women, and their appearances are often portrayed as erotic and eye-catching. In the early twentieth century, women were often portrayed seriously and stereotypically, and their unique characteristics and personalities were not fully expressed. In the 1920s, the image of women became glamorous. However, behind the glamour, there was a false image of women tailored to men’s desires and fantasies. In the 1930s, the social contribution of women was generally avoided, while in the 1940s women were often portrayed as both sacrificial victims and evil witches. By the 1950s, Hollywood films were showing women as good wives and loving mothers and breast fanatics, while in the 1960s and 1970s, women’s sexuality was presented as psychopathic [7]. It is clear from those that no matter how much the times changed, the portrayal of women in the classic Hollywood film system could not escape the fate of the sex object.

3 Film Analysis

3.1 Time Performance

The time scales that have shown in *Je, tu, il, elle*, *Jeanne Dielman*, and *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* are real and long enough. Director used as few clips as possible so that she strengthens the experience sense of audiences when they are watching the film by presenting large sections of dialogue between characters. The slow rhythm of the story makes the audience’s emotions unconsciously substitute for the first perspective of the main female characters in the film. This is one of the key methods to express feminist characteristics in these three films.

Mulvey pointed out that “watching itself is a source of pleasure”. This actually refers to a satisfying pleasure that the audience can gain from the scenes designed by the filmmaker in traditional movies, but Ackerman greatly lengthens the time in the film, so that the pleasure gained from watching visual symbols is largely dispelled [8]. In *Jeanne Dielman*, people watch a housewife doing meticulous housework step by step, from cooking, and eating to washing dishes. Among these pictures, the real rhythm of daily life has replaced dynamic editing in traditional films. The long time and the narrow

space together constitute a cage for a housewife, no matter whether the audience has done the housework before or not, they can considerably feel the real dilemma where the housewives are actually in.

It can be found that *Je, tu, il, elle*, and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* also adhere to some similar principles. In *Je, tu, il, elle*, the ten minutes night conversation between the girl and the driver allows the audience to substitute the man character as a first perspective that besings observed and questioned by the female. The active subject becomes female hereby, and men appear as a role who is waiting for women to discover and ask. *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* presents this point better. In the journey of Anna, the director used a large amount of real-time to depict the encounters and conversations that happened on the train, the night scenery of the city along the way, and Anna's frustration and confusion when she is in her room alone. These prolonged periods not only make female images focused but also let females really become silent expressionists so that females' psychology and the current situation of daily life can be displayed in a vivid way. We may not say that Ackerman's attitude to film time can be regarded as an Avant-grade one, but she did find one of the feminist expressions that are suitable for films.

3.2 Lens Language

The three works of Jeanne Dielman, *Je, tu, il, elle* and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* use fixed long shots, acoustic effects, and authenticity to represent the characters. Jeanne Dielman in the absence of editing, the heroine's time seems to be a real-life time. Ackerman's choice of this slow-paced shooting magnifies the character's plight and heart. Maybe everything in life is so slow and painful, and every mother has an ordinary and great Jeanne Dielman [9]. *Je, tu, il, elle* can easily and intuitively feel Ackerman's sensitivity to space and light which is different from ordinary people, and feels that she can easily reflect the emotions of the three spaces. Anna's Journey Ackerman uses delicate lenses to record a woman's emotional changes in mobile space and continuous time. Autistic personality and alienated interpersonal relationships are mutually causal, and continuously experience a strong sense of loneliness and anxiety through lenses. The fixed long lens at the beginning of the exit establishes the journey mode of the film and the loneliness of the characters.

What we can most feel from Ackerman's movies is the passage of time. "Slow-paced" and real-time reproduction show the "truth" of an ordinary woman's life in the feminist film plot. Using a very simple shooting method, it shows the real effect of women and creates a unique aesthetic style in feminist movies. Ackerman's aesthetic thrift is not only what the audience knows about the film language, but rarely follows the rules of sequential editing. She opposes the acceleration of real-time in the film so that the basic composition of the film: time, image, and sound are subversive. In other words, feminist pictures and sounds cut from mainstream movies exist in Ackerman's films. This kind of sound and painting, which is almost only created with long lenses, is what Ackerman called her image "record". For example, Ackerman frequently asked Na to do housework through real-time cameras. And this way of dealing with time is indeed based on reality but beyond the reality of daily life.

3.3 Representation of the Female Character's Identity

All three films portray real and ordinary female characters and aim to show women living as their true selves rather than just as subordinate to men. Mulvey notes that it is not the woman herself that matters, but the image she presents on screen and the role she plays in the narrative. In classic Hollywood films, it is mostly superheroes and crazy love stories that often dominate the screen. In these films, women are portrayed in glamorous roles, while films about women's real daily lives seldom happen.

Jeanne Dielman is exactly an account of the life of an ordinary woman. Although women are often seen as the Other in the male-dominated world [10], in this film Jeanne stands at the center of the story. She has multiple identities, with male figures such as her son and whorehouse visitor as an extension of the woman's life. It is a challenge to male hegemony. As a mother, she takes care of her son's life in every way possible. As a housewife, she runs the household, and her daily routine is almost repetitive. It is a representation of the situation of all women at that time and a microcosm of countless real housewives. And her identity as a prostitute has not been cut off, nor has she been concealed in order to maintain the dignified image of women who often appear on the screen. There does not pretend to create a peaceful representation, but it is integrated into the orbit of her life. At the same time, Jeanne's solitary silence in her daily life is impressive, especially the six minutes she sits quietly and alone after the murder, delivering the most shocking blow with the calmest image.

Unlike the intense innovation of *Jeanne Dielman*, *Je, tu, il, elle*, and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* are relatively steady and restrained. They show women's entanglement with themselves, their lonely emptiness, and eventual release. In *Je, tu, il, elle*, a woman is in an enclosed space, anxiously reading letters. She is naked and examining herself, being gazed at while gazing back at the audience. As a bystander, she listens to the shame-filled self-representation of the man. In the rawest of unadorned sexuality, female desire explodes. It is the self-expression of a lonely, confused and naked woman in a minimalist space. The same is true of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*, where the overall tone is somewhat melancholic and empty, with a slow pace. The seemingly uninhibited female director, Anna, meets and departs again and again, and the conversations are punctuated by various feminine anxieties. However, the presence of men adds to the sense of oppression, which is helpless and desperate. In her wanderings, Anna rejects traditional family values and seems to dissipate male oppression as she listens and confides. However, when she returns home, to so-called normal society, it is still a desperate and unending life that she cannot resist.

4 Conclusion

Through the analysis and study of feminist expressions in Chantal Akerman's three films through feminist film criticism theory, it is summarized that Chantal Akerman challenges traditional male films in film language and narrative content, breaking the Hollywood-style female image. Feminism is Akerman's lingering label and one of the core elements that make up the temperament of her work. Her three works *Je, tu, il, elle*, *Jeanne Dillman* and *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* show a highly similar feminist expression core. Akerman uses fixed long shots, almost stagnant plots, and extremely simple shooting

methods centered on female characters, which greatly dispelled the pleasure of viewing visual symbols, daily showing women's survival dilemma and living conditions, and challenging male hegemony. As a landmark figure in the history of feminist films, Chantal Akerman's previous research has focused on Jeanne Dillman. This article hopes to analyze and study more on "women in daily life" in the other two works, expand the content of the research to the commonality and specific methods of the three works in breaking the traditional female image in Hollywood, and elaborate on the language and narrative content of the film, rather than the single image of women themselves. To better provide some new perspectives on Akerman's works and feminist films. In response to feminism, it is necessary to focus more on a wider range of film genres and analyze and study the development and changes of feminism at all stages and various films that highlight feminism from a longer time scale to emphasize the existence of women in society.

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