Five Films by Women that Changed My Life

(2. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* (1973) Written and Directed by Chantal Akerman)

by Jordon Briggs

*Je, Tu, Il, Elle* hit me instantly. *Jeanne Dielman,* I still cherish. But on my second watch of Ackerman’s film, *I, You, He, She,* the film, for me, became a revelation. After a few minutes into the film, you see a woman coming to grips with something. In reality we don’t know what it is. We just know that there is something. She is going along. That’s why, to me, the film is so brilliant. It’s about things exactly as they are in the now. And we the audience, don’t know whats going to happen. That’s why the first words, I think, Chantel Akerman as the lead character utters, are “And so I left," while being filmed sitting in a chair, facing the wall, while the camera—while we, the audience—face her. This film taught me that I could be myself—that I do not have be defined.

Akerman in a way, became a friend. When I saw an Ackerman film for the first time granted where and when, and at what point of my life I saw it, Akerman’s film was needed. I was at the Lincoln Film Society Center, on a day off from school, and had been considering dropping out and pursing writing. For me, seeing *Jeanne Dielman* was a life altering experience: it was my first time at the New York Film Festival, first time feeling the highfaluting of film buffs and snobs, and the first time I fell in love with a filmmaker just by watching their films. But it was seeing *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* thanks to a class at Pratt Institute, and seeing it again, that solidified that.

Ackerman starts at a point—not *the* point. Everything is in motion, just like the chaos of the world. Now that I’m writing about it, I think this film is a deconstruction of linear story telling, and possibly, a critique on a Judaeo Christian belief in determinism, linear thinking, stability— of dogma. In *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* there is no blueprint. Akerman says, “No…you’re going to sit here and watch these people do things and not get it.” You’re not supposed to get it--there’s nothing to get! Only that which is there. The personal is political. What people do and what matters to them, makes them, them, and makes them political entities.

The same denial of story— of a “clear” story— and a satisfactory ending happens in *Jeanne Dielman*, and in another film of hers, *Hotel Monterey, w*hich makes me think she’s usually trying to challenge our view of narrative and ideology, and at the same time further widen our scope on what it means to be human—what it means to exist in the world. Akerman’s film showed me that I can could be expansive. That I could live expansive. That there is more to the world, and to people outside of me—especially of women—and that people live different lives than I. For me, that notion is everything.

When I heard that Akerman died before the NYFF and seeing *Jeanne Dielman*—and for some reason when I saw her picture and when I saw stills of her films— I felt a connection. Seeing, *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* for the second time gave me the feeling that an artist understood me—and I understood them.

Much like *Daughters of the Dust*, like *Orlando*, like *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *I, You, He, She*, always seems to be saying: you don’t have to be what everyone says you have to be. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* added to my life, and we need more films such as this one.