

**LA MADAME DE LA MAISON DU 23 QUAI DU
COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES: AN
EXAMINATION OF SEX WORK IN FILM
THROUGH COSTUMING**

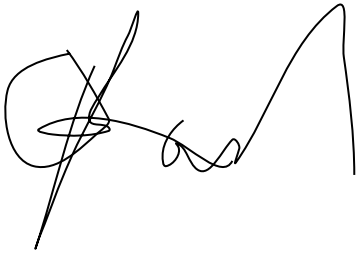
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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Oran O'Reilly', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

Oran O'Reilly

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Abstract

This thesis examines the tropes and stereotypes associated with the costuming of sex workers in film by analysing the costuming of a film that contradicts these archetypes. This is Chantal Akerman's 1975 Belgian film, *Jeanne Dielman 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.

This analysis involved examining the costuming in *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) as it was presented to the audience, comparing the film with two counterparts in the sex work canon, and contrasting the film's initial promotional materials in juxtaposition with sexual advertisements of the time. Additionally, I consulted with various texts and academic sources to further support my findings.

The culmination of this research exemplifies the incongruous nature of this film against accepted stereotypes, as established and maintained by other media contemporary to the film's release. These findings indicate that despite instinctual, cultural, and societal restrictions placed on the portrayal of sex workers, a successful outlier can emerge that defies these expectations and becomes a cornerstone of the canon.

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Introduction

Prostitution is often interpolated as “the oldest profession in the world”, with evidence dating back to 2400 BCE in Ancient Mesopotamia (Pritchard, 2021). This age-old vocation has had a taboo and proscribed documentation in history, with the job itself, the workers and the patrons inspiring numerous artefacts and works of art. With the widespread advent of film in the late 19th century (Cook & Sklar, 2025) came a new avenue in which sex workers could be depicted. In the beginning, actual sex workers were cast as the individuals performing sex work in these *Stag* and *Blue* movies (Phillips, 2018). The production of these films came as early as 1896, along with their censorship. The existence of these performers has been and remains a critical aspect of the Western film canon. Upon researching the broad topic of sex work in film, I have found that an efficient analysis of these films can be accomplished by examining their costuming. The costuming of sex workers in these films is reflective of the zeitgeist’s feelings towards sex at the time of a film’s release and often gives a clear illustration of the moral standpoint the makers of the film have towards the profession. These films frequently fall under the same tropes, as imposed by censors, and typically reflect the prevailing attitudes towards sex at the time, as denounced by the Catholic Church.

The topic of sex workers in film is an exceedingly large undertaking to cover in this singular thesis, as each film in this category tends to utilise, break and bend tropes to depict their respective sex workers. In this thesis, I aim to analyse a film that I believe is a true maverick within the canon, with its bucking of traditional costuming of a sex worker. This is Chantal Akerman’s 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. This Belgian film follows a middle-aged sex worker over three days of her life and culminates in a shocking ending, marked by a murder committed by the eponymous character. With minimal and conservative costuming, the film’s attempt at incongruity within the genre is evident. The

prejudices of usual sex-work-based films are absent in this film, and the filmmakers' intentions are successfully realised. To illustrate this, I will analyse three facets of the film and how they fit within its canon.

Throughout this thesis, I will be using the general terms *sex work* and *sex worker* when referring to the performance of sexual acts in exchange for money. Feminist activist Carol Leigh previously coined both terms in the late 1970s in an attempt to humanise the language used around the topic of sex work (Lindqwister, 2022).

In Chapter One, I will examine the film as it is presented to its audience, focusing on its use of costuming to portray Jeanne as a multi-faceted woman who is more than her vocation. I will also highlight the absence of a named costumer and its effect on the film's overall perception. In Chapter Two, I intend to compare the film to alternative films within the same canon of sex work in film. The two films I will analyse in comparison are Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967) and Alan J. Pakula's *Klute* (1971). I believe it is essential to demonstrate where this film stands against its counterparts. I will conduct my analysis in terms of genre, budget, location, societal and political standards, and the general gaze associated with the gender of their respective directors. A notable differentiation between the three films is their respective costume designers, who all bring their own unique experiences and expertise to the films. One is a fashion designer, another a renowned designer, and the third an unidentified designer.

In Chapter Three, I will analyse how the film sought to be perceived and utilised the visual identity of its costuming in its promotional material to accomplish this. I will attempt to compare its advertising to contemporary artefacts about sex work and domestic sex-based lifestyles. One specific artefact I will examine is the fetish magazine *AtomAge*, published throughout the 1970s.

Overall, I intend to illustrate how the film successfully subverts the stereotypical tropes that its counterparts typically succumb to and fall victim to. Thus, I plan to demonstrate the lasting significance of *Jeanne Dielman....* (1975) and its sincere and unbiased depiction of sex work

on film. I also believe it is essential to state that costuming a character promiscuously is not inherently bad or shameful. In this thesis, my aim is not to degrade or scorn sex work or its participants but rather to explore and highlight how sex-work-based films can exploit and objectify women through specific costuming choices. From personal experience, I recognise the sensitivity and diligence required when attempting to costume characters involved in depictions of sex work-based films. In early 2024, I worked as the lead costume designer on a short film called *Tough Love* (McKeogh, 2024), see Figure I.1. The film is about a sex worker who ultimately ends up murdering one of her clients, similar to the plot of *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975). The film influenced many of the production elements in *Tough Love* (2024), such as the set design and cinematography choices. My experience in costume design for this project enhanced my appreciation for films within this canon, which effectively portray sex workers in an entertaining and thought-provoking manner while remaining respectful and humane. This experience also inspired me to research the topic further, including the film *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) itself, ultimately leading me to select it as the subject of my thesis.

Chapter One

An incongruous submission in the canon of costuming sex workers



Figure I.1: Still of Clara Fitzgerald in Tough Love (2024)

McKeogh, O. (2024). Tough Love. (Image).

Chantal Akerman's 1975 cult classic *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, meticulously follows three days in the life of its titular character, Jeanne Dielman. The last of which culminates in the stabbing of one of her male clients, whom she is engaging in intercourse with for money. *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) is a singular and unprecedented submission in the canon of films revolving around sex work. Films in which sex work plays a key role in its plot tend to be culturally demoted to the label of "smut" in the Western canon and banished to a sub-academic void of forgotten 'B' movies and *Pornos*. On the contrary, outliers exist; Garry Marshall's film about a Hollywood escort, *Pretty Woman* (1990), made \$432,566,361 in worldwide box office sales (The Numbers, no date). Sex work-centred films that receive critical and commercial acclaim tend to be elevated to a slightly higher cultural echelon in canon acclaim, leading to their categorisation as *cult films*. *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), still defiant 50 years after the film's release, resists this rigid categorisation. Bergstrom (2015) expresses how, 'In January 1976, Le Monde heralded Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* as "the first masterpiece in the feminine in the history of the cinema".' Initially, the film debuted on the esteemed Sight and Sound's 'Greatest Films of All Time' list (BFI, 2021) in the 35th spot, then in 2022's 10 yearly re-ordering of the poll (which is voted on by film critics, academics, writers and significant cinephiles), the film took the coveted number one spot (BFI, 2022).

Jeanne Dielman... (1975) now stands as a cornerstone of film excellence and shows a clear shift in the zeitgeist's current attempt at spotlighting female lead cinema, which has been emerging more prevalently in recent years. As I write this thesis, the film's impact is still evident. It will be screened on February 16th and 20th at the Irish Film Institute in Dublin's city centre. The film is staunchly revered by feminist audiences due to its central themes of womanhood and female body autonomy and because it was helmed majorly by a female team led by a female director. The film does not seek to weaponise sex work or its workers, nor does it look down upon them. Instead, it acts as a character study designed to humanise Jeanne, portraying her as an authentic individual who disgruntledly tries to navigate the world around

her and begins to ponder her existence and place in the world. Akerman spoke of the film at its premiere in Cannes, stating:

I understood the importance of the film many months after finishing it. In the beginning I thought I was just telling three days in the life of a woman, later I realized that it was a film about the occupation of time, about anguish: doing things in order not to think about the fundamental problem, that of being. (Fondation Chantal Akerman, no date)

The character of Jeanne Dielman herself is presented to us in a raw and grounded setting, with no judgements made about her vocation. Contrasting this with the majority of depictions in the history of sex work on film, this begs the question, how did the film even get made in the first place? How did a *dowdy housewife* in her worn dressing gown remain untouched by the sexed-up portrayals that seemed to surround her? When so many other depictions of sex workers have become antiquated in this quickly moving social justice age, how has this little art house film with a budget of \$120,000 (Wikipedia, 2021) not only aged so well in the eyes of audiences but gained even further acclaim with time? I beg to argue that the film's costuming is a massive indicator of why this film stands as such a maverick in its field. The understated and toned-down nature of the physical costumes is an antithesis of the character's vocation and deep psyche. Jeanne makes no statements stylistically, giving the audience no indication of her motives or, even more importantly, what is to come. The choice to continually dress Jeanne in this seemingly mundane and ordinary fashion lures the audience in with a false sense of security, which ultimately changes as the film dares to challenge our perception of what we assume of her. Existing in an already radical genre, Jeanne's clothes are in no way radical and in no way that of a killer. She becomes an enigma, challenging the audience to figure out a character who cannot be read through her clothing.

When researching deeper into the making of the film and the cast and crew involved, one cannot help but notice the lack of information on its costuming and, more importantly, the

designer behind it. This incognisance of the film's costuming is a curiosity that I wanted to dive into while researching for this thesis. As far as my research went, I found no clear or concrete identification indicating who was responsible for the wardrobe Jeanne wears, so possibly the costumer's name was omitted altogether from the credits and press. However, this leads me to believe that there was not one specific costumer hired for the film. There are variable possible theories to this; perhaps Delphine Seyrig, who played Jeanne, self-styled, possibly it was Akerman herself who selected the costumes in collaboration with art director Jean-Pol Ferbus, or maybe it was the specialisation of Eliane Marcus, who worked as Seyrig's hair and makeup artist on the film. The costume designer typically reports to the director for development and final approval in film productions. Consequently, Akerman would have been involved in shaping Jeanne's wardrobe and physical appearance, as 'costumes are one of the many tools the director has to tell the story' (Landis, 2014). Due to the visual cohesiveness of the film, it is clear that there is an intentional unity behind every detail in the production's design.

Regardless of who put the character of Jeanne into what she is wearing, the subversiveness of the costuming in this genre remains. Interestingly, I think the lack of importance placed on the wardrobe department adds to the realism of this piece. Jeanne's wardrobe feels genuine, and it is as though she chooses her outfits herself, which could have possibly been the actual case (for the actor). There is an evident intention behind each outfit she wears, even though they seemingly lack the cohesiveness and uniformity a professional costumer would have put her in. The choice of not hiring a *named* or *established* costumer is also indicative of the film's attempt not to limelight focus on the 'glamour' or 'allure' that is most often associated with the depiction of sex workers in film.

The in-disclosure of who is responsible, paired with the incongruity of the usual attempt to dress a sex worker in something risqué, and the ambiguity of Jeanne's outfits, is an interesting case study on actualising layered individuals through costuming. I will discuss the outfits she is presented in, as they are presented to us, in hopes of further illustrating this.

The journey of this film begins with the deafening scream of gas, filling the scene before the titles have even finished rolling. This is the noise of a gas stove turning on, a possible reference to the end of one of Akerman's earlier short films (*Saute Ma Ville*, 1968), where a young girl kills herself via kitchen gas. The screen then cuts to Jeanne in her kitchen, cooking. We are now inside *23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. She wears a checkered house coat, which



Akerman, 1975).

a minimal make

he then reveals to

skirt paired with



cardigan (Figure 1.3) (Akerman, 1975), all pieces of clothes of which she re-wears later in the

Figure 1.1: Still of Delphine Seyrig in Jeanne

Dielman... (1975)
complacently domestic, representative of a mother confined to the kitchen, or simply reflecting Akerman, Chantal (1975). Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
the character's penchant for a particular pallet. Despite intellectual interrogation, Jeanne and

Figure 1.2: Still of Delphine Seyrig in Jeanne

Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. (Online Video).

her home have a strong visual symbiosis. She is visually in her element. The muted palette of



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typical of a l

rbell; she co

man (played



finds out is a client of hers that she has sex with for money. She then performs her act and

Figure 1.3: Still of Delphine Seyrig in Jeanne

Dielman... (1975)
see the actual service taking place but simply the events before and after. Jeanne's client leaves Akerman, Chantal (1975). Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
her house, and she casually prepares dinner for herself and her son Sylvain Dielman (played

Figure 1.4: Still of Delphine Seyrig in Jeanne

Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. (Online Video).

by Jan Decorte). Akerman consciously chose this distinct outfit to unveil Jeanne to us. As I previously mentioned, this act of costuming is where *Jeanne Dielman...*'s (1975) subversion of the genre comes into play.

The first costume an audience witnesses a character in establishes the visual standard they will hold for them. Anything a character wears henceforth will be compared and contrasted to the audience's initial perception of them. The film's makers set a visual tone for her by dressing Jeanne in an average, matronly, sensible outfit. She is not tacky, low class or dressed in a gauche loud pattern, but instead, she is presentable, respectable and, most importantly, motherly. We instantly recognise and perceive one of her facets (being a mother) and make it her whole personality because this is all we can assume about her. If the film took the typical route when it comes to media surrounding sex work, we would have been introduced to Jeanne wearing something provocative, but we are not. The film bewilders the audience in hopes of demonstrating its core motif and significance by rejecting societal standards of how a sex worker should look and dress.

Incidentally, the following scene is the only time we see Jeanne utterly nude in the film. It is a lengthy scene for its subject matter, running at just over three minutes, in which we watch Jeanne bathe herself (Figure 1.5) (Akerman, 1975). Similarly to the scene where she is cooking, this is a monotonous action. It is not intended to be sexual; it is simply another one of her daily rituals. The film has a highly intimate feeling, but there remains a sense of formality in the setting. Shot by Babette Mangolte, though intimate, the film is not voyeuristic. By nature of the plot, there is sex, but it depicts the topic the same way a biology textbook might approach the subject. There is no sensuality in its showcasing of these sexual acts. It intentionally chooses when to show *skin* and when not to. Nudity is only used when Jeanne is in the privacy of her bathroom. She is not performing an act nude; she is simply living her life. As covered in her BFI Film Classics booklet '*Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*' (2021), Catherine Fowler implies that Jeanne dares to ignore the audience.



Figure 1. 5: Still of Delphine Seyrig in Jeanne Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. (Online Video).

This approach to sex work had never been explored so audaciously in Western cinema and did not meet the unsaid societal expectations of how a *prostitute* should act. This, I think, frustrated contemporary critics who thought of the subject in vain of the *Madonna / Whore Complex*, and so were unable to pinpoint Jeanne, as she purposefully did not fit both. Jeanne's position as a self-respecting sex worker who is also a mother is a concept not seen commonly in media and is, therefore, difficult for audiences to comprehend, as it transgresses the boundaries established by the *Madonna/Whore Complex*. Bromwich (2015) explores this topic in her book *Mothers, Mothering and Sex Work*, stating:

By definition, to be a whore and a mother is to be a failure. Culturally, the line between Madonna and Whore cannot be transgressed without punishment, so women who support themselves and their children by working in the sex trades are considered damaged victims who, also by definition, have "lost" their children or irresponsible sex pots who are unworthy of them. (p.112)

The concept of depicting motherhood on film in its fragmented form was complex for contemporary critics to grasp as it contradicted their understanding of what motherhood involved. In Vincent Canby's 1983 review of the film, he expresses his disdain for the film and Jeanne herself, stating:

Miss Seyrig, though she has never looked more beautiful, is a fascinating, self-mockingly frumpy Jeanne Dielman, who is less a character than some nightmarish representation of a woman. Curiously, Miss Seyrig's elegant features do not look out of place in this bourgeois world, which, as recorded in the photography of Babette Mangolte, is as stylized as Miss Seyrig's presence.

Canby further expresses his disdain for the film, declaring that "'Jeanne Dielman' is not a movie to see if you're in a hurry to go somewhere else. It demands total attention. If one gives it anything less its revenge will be a boredom so complete it might be fatal." Many of these critics criticised the film in this way as it challenged their ingrained beliefs about how a mother should behave, unable to comprehend something so alien to them. Sayed discusses these deep-seated social beliefs on motherhood, describing how:

Mother characters populating the backdrops of cinematic narratives are noteworthy both for what they reflect about culture and for the ways that they affect cultural attitudes and ideas about the roles, relationships, and potentialities of women and mothers. The screen often echoes unrealistic expectations that too often become the model to which women hold themselves and to which their societies likewise measure them. (2016, p.1)

Upon its release, many reviewers, often male, referred to the nature of the actions in the film being depicted to their completion (such as her bathing while the camera statically sits there and watches) as voyeuristic. I dare to argue that any reference to this supposed "voyeurism" comes from said critics' Freudian complexes and is not indeed the film's intention. The

costuming alone is argument enough to support this, as the only time Jeanne lays herself completely bare is in isolation, not for anyone but the audience's eyes to see. In my opinion, Cybelle H. McFadden (2014) articulates this best while covering Danièle Dubroux's thoughts on Jeanne being the audience pseudo-mother;

In her article "Le familier inquiétant (Jeanne Dielman)," Danièle Dubroux argues for the importance of watching Jeanne's daily gestures: She has nothing to do with the front of the scene. She is elsewhere; she is in us; she is our mother, our mothers, strangely made into spectacle, her daily gestures, repeated a million times and finally we look at these gestures that we question. (p.87)

Jeanne's final outfit is the same as the one in the film's beginning (Figure 1.6) (Akerman, 1975). We see her uniform of a black skirt, cream blouse and grey cardigan, but this time, she removes her blouse to reveal a halter chamise (Figure 1.7) (Akerman, 1975). The scene cuts from her sitting, staring at her reflection, to a startling image of the back of a man (a client) in a white vest lying on top of her (Figure 1.8) (Akerman, 1975). She looks disassociated, and her expression changes as the man becomes more active (Figure 1.9) (Akerman, 1975). She presumably begins to orgasm. This is the first and only time we see her orgasm (the completion of sex) with a client. The scene continues until both participants climax (her job is complete) and then cuts to her putting back on her blouse (Figure 1.10) (Akerman, 1975). She again is looking in the mirror, this time with her client lying on the bed in the background. The camera stays still as we watch Jeanne get up, grab a pair of scissors from her dresser, walk to her client, lean over and stab him (Figure 1.11) (Akerman, 1975). We followed her into the kitchen to fetch these scissors just minutes before to open a package. He grunts as her body weight penetrates the shears deeper, and we linger on the man alone in the shot, presumably dead. This is ultimately the last action we see Jeanne perform to completion (Figure 1.12) (Akerman, 1975). We cut to the final shot, where the film ends with Jeanne sitting at her dining table in her blouse, this time with a blood stain visible on her left breast (Figure 1.13) (Akerman, 1975). The camera places her in the centre of the frame, the lighting is low, and there is no



a range of contemplati
as the soundtrack tran
nd continues.



Figure 1.10: Still of Delphine Seyrig and Yves Bical in
Jeanne Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. (Online Video).

Figure 1.11: Still of Delphine Seyrig and Yves Bical in
Jeanne Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. (Online Video).



eanne
23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. (Online Video).



Figure
Akerman,
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. (Online Video).

Figure 1.12: Still of Delphine Seyrig and Yves Bical in
Jeanne Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. (Online Video).



Figure 1.13: Still of Delphine Seyrig in *Jeanne
Dielman...* (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. (Online Video).



Figure 1. 8: Still of Delphine Seyrig and Yves Bical in
Jeanne Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. (Online Video).

Figure 1.9: Still of Delphine Seyrig Yves Bical in
Jeanne Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai
du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. (Online Video).

Chapter Two

A comparison of *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *Klute* (1971).

In further researching the topic of sex work in film, I have observed the knock-on effect that genre has on a film's portrayal of sex work. Regarding genre, *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) stands firmly in its refusal to be labelled. It can be classified as a domestic drama, part of the *slow cinema* movement. The film is character-driven and feels more like a character study than a cohesive story-driven arc with a resolution (though a character arc is still present). Throughout its 3-hour and 21-minute run-time, Seyrig carries us through a portrait of a tangible woman. Jeanne is a mother who performs sex work, and the audience lives with her moment by moment over the condensed three days. There is a sensitivity to the subject that I believe was possibly achievable due to the film's low budget, resulting in less input from any higher-ups seeking to create a wider margin of profit. The film's budget was £120,000, primarily funded by a grant awarded to Akerman by the Belgian government (Wikipedia, 2021). When delving deeper into my research on *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), I wanted to analyse the film and its costuming compared to other films in the canon of sex work on screen. I sought to examine how subversive the film's costuming truly is and to illustrate more effectively the tropes that films addressing this topic usually fall victim to or sub-verse in similar or contrasting ways to *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975). The two films that I believe most closely accompany *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) in the canon are *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *Klute* (1971). *Klute* (1971) exemplifies a typical Hollywood film, *Belle de Jour* (1967) captures the European sensibility of the French New Wave, and *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) represents an independent art-house film.

Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967) stars Catherine Deneuve as Séverine Serizy, a housewife who secretly joins a high-class brothel while her husband is working, in an attempt to live out her erotic fantasies. The French film is based on Joseph Kessel's (1928) novel of the same

name. In tone, the film is surreal, with Séverine's fantasies drawing the audience deeper and deeper into her psyche, thus transforming the film into a psychological erotic drama. The costumes for the film were designed by French couturier Yves Saint Laurent, as seen in Figure 2.1 (Saint Laurent, 1967) and Figure 2.2 (Buñuel, 1967). The visual identity Saint Laurent created for the character was reflective of a fashion-forward Parisian woman, which he executed by dressing Deneuve in comparable designs inspired by his contemporaneous *Haute Couture* collection (Figure 2.3) (Saint Laurent, 1966). The choice to have Deneuve's costumes crafted by a renowned designer contrasts with that of *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), whose costumes lack adequate documentation. This also reflects the film's ethos concerning costumes, as it does not prioritise glamour or ostentation. Deneuve's custom-designed wardrobe from Saint Laurent adds an air of Parisian bourgeois chic-ness to the character of Séverine. Deneuve states, 'The character's style really owes a lot to the image Saint Laurent created.' (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris, no date).



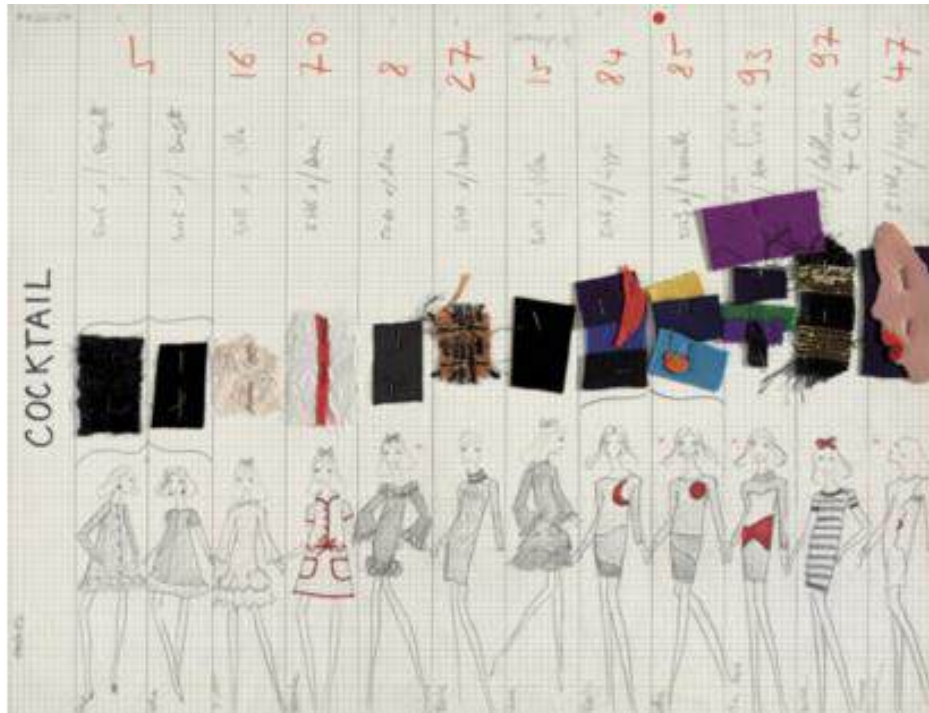
Figure 2.1: Yves Saint Laurent costume design sketch for the character Séverine Serizy in *Belle de Jour* (1967)

Saint Laurent, Y. (1967). *Yves Saint Laurent and the Cinema The costumes of Belle de Jour*. (Online Image).



Figure 2.2: Still of Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour* (1967)

Buñuel, Luis (1967). *Belle de Jour*. (Online Image).



*Figure 2.3: designs for Yves Saint Laurent cocktail dresses
(1966)*

*Saint Laurent, Y. (1966). "Cocktail" Collection Board.
Homage to Pop Art. Autumn-winter 1966 haute couture
collection. (Image).*

The costumes in the film subvert the typically contemporaneously promiscuous sex worker we are used to seeing in film (e.g., Joan Crawford as Sadie Thompson in *Rain* (1932)) (Figure 2.4) (United Artists, 1932). In *Rain* (1932), Crawford's attire is quite provocative for its time; however, it seems relatively modest and tame compared to *Belle de Jour* (1967). Crawford's character wears heavy makeup and shows some cleavage with a short hemline. This was a typical uniform used by costume designers to indicate to the audience which character was promiscuous, often reflecting the taboos and social conventions of its time.



*Figure 2.4: Publicity still of Joan Crawford for Rain
(1932)*

*United Artists (1932). Rain Joan Crawford 1932.
(Online Image).*

Belle de Jour's (1967) premise revolves around the fact that Séverine engages in sex work out of wanting to explore her perverse extramarital fantasies. Throughout the film, Deneuve struts down the rues of Paris in her couture garments, typically in neutral tones, resembling a store mannequin. She is always *done up* with perfect hair, nails, shoes and a matching bag, all harmoniously tying the outfit together. The character is chic, and the plot relies on the audience's perception of her hyper-glamourisation to *justify* her actions. The cultural lens shifts focus from her profession to her physical appearance and hyper-stylisation, and the spectacle of the film centres on her charm and allure rather than her career, leaving little room for critique of feminism or sex work itself. In doing so, it negates any of the film's moral ambiguity. It transforms the piece into a surrealist flurry of glamour, 'As Deneuve said, clothes in *Belle de Jour*, in their ultra-sophistication, 'brought an almost surrealist aspect to the film' (Vincendeau, 2000, p.201). In the 1960s, France was in the early stages of becoming an abolitionist country concerning sex work, which may have influenced why the film attempted to glamourise the character so much and depict her as someone desirable and enticing.

According to the 'Prostitution Policies in France' essay authored by various scholars from Hal Open Science,

Since then (1960), prostitutes are considered as socially maladjusted persons who need social work assistance, whereas any form of facilitation, organisation and exploitation of their activities are coerced as procuring. (Darley, et al., 2018, p.1).

The film sustains the need to glamourise sex work, notably in its choice of Séverine's attire and the garments in which she performs her sexual encounters. Séverine wears a variety of costumes throughout the scenes where we see her completing her work. These costumes can be taken both figuratively and literally, as ultimately, she wears the outfits while playing parts in her customers' fantasies. One outfit she wears that strikes a comparison between herself and Jeanne is the brassiere she wears during her first job in the bordello (Figure 2.5) (Buñuel, 1967). She wears a later version of the *bullet bra*, still pointed but less aggressive. It is chic of the time, and it matches her slip skirt. In Jeanne's case, she wears a similar bra, but it is less fitted (Figure 2.6) (Akerman, 1975). It has a thicker double strap and is more conservative in covering flesh. Figure 2.7 (Sears, 1975) displays an advertisement for a *popular criss-cross bra* similar to the brassiere that Jeanne wears. These brassieres are being advertised with a focus on functionality rather than aesthetics. This further expresses Jeanne's utilitarian approach to dressing, putting function over form, as her brassiere does not draw attention to her cleavage. Forever the erogenous zone on the body, a character's cleavage is a key identifier of their visualised sexuality. Fields describes how;

Moreover, the growing cultural preoccupation with women's breasts during the twentieth century itself contributed to the shaping of this silhouette and the meanings it produced. The brassiere was thus a critical site of gender differentiation, as well as a source of pleasure and power, in twentieth-century American culture and continues to be so today. (2007, p.81)

Undergarments are arguably the most intimate and private layer of costuming and highly indicative of a character's personality. They are pieces a character wears for themselves and, if visible, wears for performance, as exemplified by Séverine, who wears her undergarments to cater to her clients' desires. The stylised sensual underwear of Séverine shows the film's intent to fetishise sex work, in comparison to Jeanne's modest motherly undergarments, where the film puts more of an emphasis on expressing genuine vulnerability. It is noteworthy to highlight the contrast between the environments that Séverine and Jeanne exist within. Séverine drifts from place to place without a defined personal space. She spends her time in a bordello and her clients' homes and lives in the public sphere, remaining an outsider wherever she goes. This contrasts with the character of Jeanne, who exists entirely within her own domestic sphere. She dwells in the comfort of her home, with her clients coming to her. She is always in control of her environment, which Séverine lacks.



Figure 2.5: Still of Catherine Deneuve in Belle du Jour (1967)
Buñuel, Luis (1967). Belle de Jour. (Online Image).



Figure 2.6: Still of Delphine Seyrig in Jeanne Dielman... (1975)
Akerman, Chantal (1975). Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. (Online Video).



Figure 2.7: Sears F-W Catalog advertising their brassier collection
Sears (1975). 1975 Sears Fall Winter Catalog, Page 204. (Image).

Alan J. Pakula's *Klute* (1971) features Jane Fonda as Bree Daniels, a call girl in New York City who gets wrapped up in the missing person case of a "John", one of her clients, who may also be responsible for the stalking she has been experiencing. This Neo-noir is thoroughly a psychological thriller regarding genre and is chalked full of themes of eroticism and paranoia. The film had an estimated budget of \$2,500,000 (IMDB, no date), and went on to win Jane Fonda the first of her two Academy Awards. The film was costume designed by Ann Roth, a now legendary Hollywood costume designer. Two years before *Klute* (1971), Roth worked as a costume designer on John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). *Midnight Cowboy* follows a young man from Texas on his journey to New York, where he embarks on a life as a sex

worker. The film won many Oscars in 1970, including the *Best Picture* award (Oscars, no date). Ann Roth was categorically up for the task of costuming both male and female sex workers. Both films are contemporary to their production and set in New York City, a location that, at the time, was a hub of criminal activity, including sex work (Collins, 1980).

Roth had her finger on the pulse of the youth scene and created fully fledged characters through her costumes in both films. Much like Séverine in *Belle de Jour* (1967), the character of Bree Daniels emerged as a cult fashion icon in the years following the film's release. The character's style influence can be seen throughout modern fashion, notably in Marc Jacobs' *Ready To Wear Spring 2020* collection, which debuted at New York Fashion Week. Scarlett Costello, who wore *Look 59* from the collection, was asked by Jacobs himself to get her hair cut in a fashion similar to Fonda's in the film. For the show, she was styled similarly to how Bree dresses in the film (i.e. a breezy textural dress and grunge makeup) (Figure 2.8) (Getty Images, 2019). Negi expands on the concept of fashion and film's symbiotic relationship, detailing how:

The relationship between fashion and film is symbiotic, with each medium influencing and enriching the other. Through iconic costumes, filmmakers create visual symbols that resonate with audiences, often shaping fashion trends and becoming part of cultural history... As the film evolves, so will the costumes that define it, ensuring that the connection between fashion and film remains as strong as ever. (2024)



Figure 2.8: Scarlett Costello wearing look 59 from Marc Jacobs RTW Spring 2020 at New York Fashion Week Getty Images (2019). Scarlett Costello wears Look 59 from Marc Jacobs Ready-To-Wear Spring 2020. (Image).

Bree's style is quite bohemian and youthful, usually adorned without a bra, and her outfits are textural and worn in; this shows her individualism and sense of free spirit (Figure 2.9) (Pakula, 1971). Her wardrobe has a breezy child-like feel that is not weighed down by domesticity like Jeanne's outfits are. Bree almost resembles a child playing dress up in her mother's business clothes. She has a unique sense of style, and her outfits tend to reflect how she feels in each scene. Fenghui Yin explains, 'In visual arts such as film and television, costume is one of the most expressive elements. It can not only reveal the changes in people's lifestyle and aesthetic

taste in the background of the times, but also express emotions and convey messages through the actors' styling' (Yin, 2023, Vol. 5, Issue 6: p.59). This is evident throughout the film, as Bree's outfits and unique sense of style reflect her feelings in each scene. We can observe this in the scene where she attends therapy, wearing a shoulder-padded blazer that makes her appear more professional and powerful while also serving as a physical manifestation of a layer of protection (Figure 2.10) (Pakula, 1971). She removes her jacket as she grows more vulnerable with her therapist, revealing a blue turtleneck that is still more conservative than the other outfits we see her in. There is a rawness to Bree's costuming, which is typical of the Neo-noir Hollywood films of the 1960s and 1970s. Bree's outfits reflect the political climate of the time. The rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s saw women striving to distance themselves from and reject beauty standards by alleviating the pressure surrounding how they dressed and appeared. Bree's wardrobe is notably bohemian, free-spirited, and unbound by the patriarchal dress codes of the eras before her (as exemplified by her choice to forgo a bra). I believe Fonda was partly responsible for this, as she sought to portray Bree's character as believable and authentic as possible. Her approach to the character involved method acting, even going as far as spending time with actual working call girls to gain an authentic understanding of the profession. (American Film Institute, 2021). Fonda did not hesitate to confront the more challenging aspects of the role, articulating:

At my request, Alan [J. Pakula] arranged for me to visit the actual city morgue, where I was allowed to look through the case files. What I saw remains with me to this day: hundreds and hundreds of color photographs of battered and bruised women who had been killed by husbands, lovers, johns. (Walsh, 2021, p.113)

Although there is a realism to the costuming, similar to that of *Jeanne Dielman...(1975)*, where *Klute* (1971) differs is its minimal extent to characterise Bree as anything other than a call girl. *Jeanne Dielman...(1975)* creates a fully fledged woman whose wardrobe reflects someone who is not just their profession but has an actual life within the domestic space. *Klute* (1971), although its attempt to be realistic, falls short of showing us anything other than a call girl. In

the scenes where Bree is not working, the costumes do not illustrate a woman who exists beyond the celluloid screen. The outfits she wears throughout the film range from a casual trench coat with booty shorts (Figure 2.11) (Pakula, 1971) to a full reptilian-like gown with a fur vest (Figure 2.12) (Pakula, 1971). This disjointedness may have been the intent of the costumer; however, it would have resonated better if there had been more cohesiveness in the character. This would have painted more of a realistic portrait of a woman, as when Bree is not in *work* mode, she becomes lost in the un-cohesiveness of the bereft of her wardrobe.



Figure 2.9: Still of Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda in Klute (1971)
Pakula, Alan J. (1971). Klute. (Online Image).



Figure 2.10: Still of Jane Fonda in Klute (1971)
Pakula, Alan J. (1971). Klute. (Online Image).



Figure 2.11: Still of Jane Fonda in *Klute* (1971)
 Pakula, Alan J. (1971). *Klute*. (Online Image).



Figure 2.12: Still of Jane Fonda in *Klute* (1971)
 Pakula, Alan J. (1971). *Klute*. (Online Image).

These are just two of many films surrounding sex work. However, when we contrast the protagonists of these specific films with the character of Jeanne Dielman, it becomes evident that the intent behind the costuming in these films varies significantly. In both *Klute* (1971) and *Belle de Jour* (1967), the directors of these films are male, which is a common practice seen in many films from the 1960s and 70s. Pakula and Buñuel are regarded as directors and auteurs within the Western cinema canon. They are recognised for their distinctive viewpoints, which inform their work and become the lenses through which the audience interprets the film. Despite being critically acclaimed, Akerman is often prefixed as a *female* director rather than an auteur, consistently being subjected to categorisation rather than viewed as a stand-alone artist in her own right. Mcfadden (2014, p.76) explores this concept of *gendered frames*, describing how the ‘critical reception of Akerman’s work tends to emphasize either her nationality or status as a female or independent filmmaker, which means that categorization of her as a filmmaker depends on the analytical context.’

Objectively, a male can make a film that authentically portrays the female experience, but in the case of both *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *Klute* (1971), I believe that the male gaze informs

the portrayal of the women in these films. Film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1975, p.808) essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is where the term *male gaze* was coined. In this essay, she theorises that portrayals of women in cinema will always be informed by the patriarchal society they exist in, which serves the male viewer's desires. While most films do fall under this, films about sex work often tend to be hyper-sexualised to satisfy the heterosexual male perspective. From analysing the costumes of the films above, *Jean Dielman...*'s (1975) costuming remains incongruous with the usual shortcomings when designing costumes for sex-work-revolved films.

Chapter Three

The Selling of Sex - a comparison of *Jeanne Dielman...*'s (1975) promotional material against contemporaneous sex and fetish artefacts

Jeanne Dielman... (1975), compared to other scripted media in the Western canon, is an equitable and candid depiction of a sex-working mother. The film does not fall victim to the usual cheap gimmicks other films in the same vein suffer at the hands of. It does not depend on vulgarities to *sell* Jeanne to the audience and does not emphasise the nature of her work. It is left unspecified in the script and finished film what specific sex work Jeanne performs, and we see little of her performing her work in the film. Instead, we witness glimpses before and after. We observe a short moment in one of the final scenes, where she is shown finally fulfilling the act of sex to completion. To contextualise the film further, I compared it with the broader net canon of media revolving around sex work contemporary to the film's initial release in the mid-70s. I intended to look at specialised categories of advertisements where sex is being sold to the audience. One piece of media I discovered while researching is the *AtomAge* fetish magazine. Other pieces of media I wanted to explore were sex ads of the 1970s, which were one of the only ways sex workers were able to advertise their work in the days of mainly printed media. By comparing these print advertisements for sex-based products and services with the promotional material for *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), I aim to demonstrate how the film distinguished itself from conventional methods of advertising sex-oriented media, explore the significance of the film's portrayal of sex work, and reflect on its publicity and advertising.

AtomAge was a British cult fetish magazine published throughout the 1970s. According to Jonny Trunk, author of 'Dressing for Pleasure in Rubber, Vinyl & Leather: The Best of

AtomAge 1972-1980' (2010, Back-Cover), the magazine was 'the underground bible of rubber, vinyl and leather fetish wear'. The publication was established by John Sutcliffe, a latex and leather-based clothing designer, to advertise his work to niche audiences. 'One of his intentions was to bring in to the open the idea that people have fetishes, today he is considered one of the patron saints of the world wide rubberist community' (*AtomAge*, no date).

The figures below show images from various magazine editions sourced from an online magazine archive (*AtomAge*, no date). Figure 3.1 shows a female model in a peach leather gimp suit. It has contours accentuating the female form underneath but covers the body from head to toe. Figure 3.2 shows another model in a full-body gimp suit, but this one is in classic black leather, featuring red leather contoured piping. Figure 3.3 shows a model wearing a leather dress buckled with a large leather belt and a Zorro-like mask covering her eyes. The model's hood is up, and they are holding a plastic umbrella.



*Figure 3.1: Submission into AtomAge
(1972-1980)
AtomAge. AtomAge A5 Edition 8.*



*Figure 3.2: Submission into AtomAge
(1972-1980)
AtomAge. AtomAge A5 Edition 9.*



*Figure 3.3: Submission into AtomAge
(1972-1980)
AtomAge. AtomAge A5 Edition 21.*

These magazines were published contemporaneously with the release of *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) and exhibit an authentic depiction of people who participate in a sexually based lifestyle by choice. The magazine featured photoshoots and reader submissions, displaying people showing off their own creations. The magazine was founded and continued on the basis of advertising and showcasing sex-based clothing and was a way for people to live out their gimp and leather fantasies, both as readers and as models. The magazine gave people in the kink community an opportunity to be either a voyeur or the subject of the voyeur. Though it is quite an extreme example of this kind of dress, the sheer contrast between how these people dress and how Jeanne is depicted dressing is exceedingly tangible. While creating the film, the makers could have pushed Jeanne to this extreme to shock the audience, and it still would have had a firm basis in the reality of kink fashion. Instead, they decided not to portray sex as an abject extension of Jeanne's expression but simply as a verb she participates in for money. The film also utilised its advertisement material to portray Jeanne in this light further.

As part of *Jeanne Dielman...*'s (1975) promotional campaign, the film released a dossier for the press (Fondation Chantel Akerman, no date). In it was an interview with Akerman

In researching sex advertisements of the mid-1970s, I came across an advertisement for an adult film under the name *Come On, Take Off Your Dress* (Vintage Edmonton, 2023). According to *Vintage Edmonton*, the film was shown at 8:00 pm in Edmonton in Alberta, Canada, in Studio 82 in mid-August of 1976. What struck me about the film was its way of marketing its-self. Figure 3.6 (Vintage Edmonton, 2023) shows a newspaper promoting the film's screening. Above the title is the tagline 'A 'Tour de Force' of EROTIC REALISM'. This claim places the film within the canon of erotic cinema as *realism*, a theme comparable to Jean *Dielman...*'s (1975) classification as a domestic drama, part of the *slow cinema* movement. Though both films claim a realism to their respective eroticism, from publicity alone, it is evident that *Come On, Take Off Your Dress* went with a more vulgar, direct way of selling its sexual themes. The poster features an illustration of a young woman undressing into lacy underwear. This alone shows the extent of the film's intent to portray realism; even the advertisement is a false depiction of femininity. Both films' purposes differ too; *Come On,*

Take Off Your Dress is made to be sex cinema, a way to relieve one's sexual desires, in contrast with *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), where one suffers through the life of a woman while she is waiting around to fulfil the desires of another person.

Jeanne Dielman... (1975) does not explore the dynamics or intricacies of Jeanne's vocation; for example, we do not observe how her clients found her or how she advertises herself. Figure 3.7 (Newspapers, no date) shows a clipping from the edition of *Philadelphia Daily News* released on Friday, March 24 1978. This particular section of page 43 shows advertisements for porn shows and live nude shows. The main advertisement I want to focus on is Clarisse Vogel's, a promotion for an *all-nude show* promising to see her live in person. For 25c on April 3rd, you can access live nude dancers and a peep show. We do not know precisely how much Jeanne charges her clients; what they get for that fee is also left unanswered.

Regarding *Jeanne*, the character being sold to the viewer, we never feel that she is someone we can buy; there is a fourth wall that removes us from the tangibility of her being a product compared to actual advertisements at the time of the film's release. The authentic sex advertisements of the 1970s sell us the women in sex work like they are clothes you can buy from a catalogue and often use adjectives associated with youth (i.e. Gallery Studios' advertisement for 'Lively, Friendly, Lovely' girls). There is a sense of integrity the film lends to Jeanne by not selling her as a product for our consumption but instead marketing her as a widowed housewife, costumed in conservative clothing, who also performs sex work. The film's efforts to present Jeanne as a humanised sex worker show the respect and reverence the filmmakers had for the vocation so as not to portray her in any negative stereotypes, even if it meant missing out on the opportunity to sell her out as *sex*.



Conclusion:

By analysing the costuming of *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), comparing the film to two counterparts in the sex work canon and analysing the film's initial promotional material, I

intended to use my thesis to demonstrate the subversiveness of the film by not falling victim to the prejudices of usual sex work based films.

This thesis led me to perform extensive research on the film itself and the broader context in which it sits. This is an enormous topic with a vast breadth of work in its canon, and choosing *Jeanne Dielman...*(1975) enabled me to contextualise this small piece of the history of sex work in film. By selecting a film that subverts the genre's prevailing trends, I could better grasp the genre and deeply understand its rules to acknowledge how extensively it subverts them. Though at first, the lack of a named costume designer stunted my research, in the end, it helped me to take a more objective approach in analysing costuming, as regardless of the process behind the scenes, the audience's perception of a character is only influenced by the final cut of the film presented to them.

I recommend that future creators of films submitted to the cultural canon of sex work make informed decisions about how to represent sex workers in their art. *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975) is a highly prevalent example of a film that does not fall for the genre's easily susceptible, harmful stereotypes and tropes. Filmmaking practitioners could benefit from a similar, humane approach to depicting the vocation.

Through this thesis, I hope to have successfully provided analytical and contextual evidence to demonstrate how the film is an incendiary entry into the canon of depictions of sex workers in cinema. The film's radicalness is in its incongruity of genre and subject. Its approach to costuming is that of conservatism, and its lack of provocativeness is reflected in its costumes, which physically embody the film's ethos—a sense of humanity given to sex workers, a rare yet welcomed entry into the canon.

Bibliography:

Films:

- *Belle de Jour* (1967) Directed by Luis Buñuel (DVD). France: Euro International Film.
- *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) Directed by Chantal Akerman (DVD). Belgium: Criterion, Janus Films.
- *Klute* (1971) Directed by Alan J. Pakula (DVD). USA: Warner Brothers.
- *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) Directed by John Schlesinger (DVD). USA: United Artists.
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