

JERRY WHITE

JEANNE DIELMANN WAS MY STAR WARS

IT HAS, OVER THE COURSE of the last six months or so, been impossible to ignore not only the new *Star Wars* movie, but the re-emergence of the *Star Wars* phenomenon itself. Readers will know basically what I mean. And yet, I am being coy, difficult in the manner of a film critic, I suppose. Because what I mean by “the *Star Wars* phenomenon” is not the action figures or the posters taped to the bedroom walls of nine-year-olds all over the globe (one of whom lives in my house; his *Star Wars* Legos get everywhere and his seven-year-old brother has a poster of Rey and Chewbacca above his bed). What I mean is the phenomenon of a mass-market, popcorn-munchable film, being used as a mediation on film history and on cinema’s mode of production.

The key to that first one is in the scene where the *First Order*, *The Force Awakens*’ rebooted baddies, stage a rally. Their leader, General Hux, carries on like a coldly rational madman, highly skilled at marshalling the emotions of the crowd toward his meticulously planned, nefarious ends. He seems Hitlerian, and of course he is. The film works hard to show us that. The rally is staged in precisely the manner of the rallies of Leni Riefenshtahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, her famed “document” of the 1934 Nuremberg party rally. It’s not just the masses of assembled troops, all straight lines and coordinated cheering, although it is that. It’s also the massive banners that are suspended from behind the stage. The setup screams *Triumph of the Will*, and J.J. Abrams is clearly betting viewers will take the reference.

He’s hedging that bet, though. For the final sequence of *Star Wars*—by which I mean the movie directed by George Lucas and released in 1977—is an equally precise rendition of the visual schematics of *Triumph of the Will*. That sequence where Han and Luke, accompanied by the wookiee Chewbacca, march through the precisely assembled rebel throngs to get their medals

from Princess Leia, is a precise duplication of the scene in *Triumph of the Will* where Hitler marches with two henchman (it's hard to tell which ones) to salute a wreath laid to commemorate the death of Paul von Hindenburg (who, as Germany's President, had named Hitler Chancellor). That part of *Triumph of the Will* has three giant vertical banners; the great hall in *Star Wars* is adorned with five. Abrams is betting that his viewers will take the wink here. He just wants to allow for the possibility that some will take it as a wink to Nazism writ large, whereas others will take it as a wink to *Star Wars*' use of Nazism.

Because this is the thing about that 1977 use: it actually represented quite a sophisticated, if utterly erroneous, intervention into a debate about history, aesthetics, and ethics. In 1974 Susan Sontag published her famed takedown of Riefenstahl in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, "Fascinating Fascism." It was ostensibly a review of the English edition of Riefenstahl's African photos, *The Last of the Nuba*, but it was really a treatise on the possibility of an aesthetic that was fascist to the core. Sontag saw in both *Triumph of the Will* and *The Last of the Nuba* an aesthetic whose fascism owed nothing to simple representations of fascist leaders and which could be found not only in Nuremberg but also in as non-Aryan a place as Sudan's Nuba mountains. At one point, scoffing at the aesthetes who would defend Riefenstahl as an artist whose command of the medium could still impress on its own terms, Sontag marvelled that she was to be "the guest of honor at a new cinephile-controlled film festival held in the summer in Colorado."

She can only be talking about the Telluride Film Festival there, and that first festival in 1974 did indeed serve as an opportunity to defend Riefenstahl as someone important to understanding the evolution of cinema as an art. That controversy raged for a few more years; by 1977 it would have still seemed pretty recent. I think that the medal sequence in *Star Wars* has to be seen both in the context of that controversy still remembered by cinephiles and as a film that had already directly quoted from countless other historically important films: C-3PO looks exactly like the "false Maria" in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*; when Luke comes discovers his burned-out homestead it is exactly like when the heroes return to the ranch in John Ford's *The Searchers* to find it has been attacked and burned by the local native guys; the scene in the cantina where Obi-Wan chops the tough's arm off is almost word-for-word from Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*. To also insert just as

direct a quotation from *Triumph of the Will*, and most importantly one that glamorises the good guys, not the bad guys, is clearly an attempt to take a position on that debate about Riefenstahl's legacy, about the degree to which it could be redeemed as something positive. Again, that's an analysis I find utterly wrong-headed, but that's an analysis, a startling argument about an ongoing controversy. It's a damn sight more advanced than what we have in *The Force Awakens*, whose analysis is, in essence, "Nazis = bad guys."

It's on the matter of cinema's mode of production where Abrams is making a more interesting intervention. And there we have to look at the scene in *The Force Awakens* when TIE fighters attack Maz Kanata's café/castle. There is a brief shot right into a fiery red sun, as both the ships and the lens wobble just a bit. That shot is an unmissable wink at *Apocalypse Now*, Frances Ford Coppola's adaptation of *Heart of Darkness* into the Vietnam War, which has a famous shot where American helicopter gunships lumber towards their targets against that exact sunset. *Apocalypse Now* almost broke Coppola, and there was more at stake than just his own career. He, along with his fellow San Francisco resident George Lucas, had set out to create a different approach to big-budget filmmaking, one that would be both dependent on the resources that you could only find in the American system but also independent from the studios themselves. That San Francisco idea of cinema was most clearly embodied by Coppola's studio American Zoetrope, which produced Lucas' first film, 1971's *THX-1138* (Lucas got connected to Coppola after winning a contest to direct a "making of" short on Coppola's early film *Finian's Rainbow*, one of the few such films that is way better than the thing it documents). It also includes the visionary editor Walter Murch (whose book-length interview with Michael Ondaatje *The Conversations* is an indispensable meditation on film aesthetics), the actor Robert Duvall (a key Coppola collaborator as well as a seriously oddball filmmaker in his own right) and of course Lucas' production company Lucasfilm. It also includes, by the way, Tom Luddy, who was for some years the Director of Special Projects for Coppola's Zoetrope Studios, but whose longest gig has been as co-director of the aforementioned Telluride Film Festival, where Coppola was, with Riefenstahl (and Gloria Swanson), one of the first guests of honour in 1974. The most contemporary manifestation of this "spirit of San Fran" is Pixar Animation Studios, which is located just outside SF in Emeryville. This CinéSanFrancisconess is not just a matter of being avant-garde; none

of these figures I've rattled off here are part of the avant garde by any stretch of the imagination (although all of them have some roots there). But it's not just a matter of being part of the US studio system either. All of these figures have been responsible for genuinely medium-expanding work, from Murch's visionary sound work on Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation* to Lucasfilm spinning off the special effects house Industrial Light and Magic (whose HQ is currently in The Presidio), a shop that gave an early job to John Lasseter, now the guiding spirit of Pixar.

To see those TIE fighters in the sunset, and to think of Coppola and Lucas' connection to him, is to realise that all this is no more. Indeed, Abrams' wink here is not at his fellow Riefenstal-pillager, but at his fellow Disney employee, and his sense of that economic relationship is much more sardonic and sophisticated than what he has to say about film history. For Disney is the studio that now owns Lucasfilm, but which more famously owns that previously-mentioned most contemporary manifestation of the "spirit of San Fran," Pixar. Those TIE fighters in the sunset are a finely tuned callback to a different way of making films, a difference that has now been fully brought within the embrace of what can only be called an Empire.

A full-bodied, full-spirited commitment to a different way of making films died on 5 October 2015. I'm referring there to the suicide of Chantal Akerman, which continues to vibrate throughout a certain province of the global republic of cinema like nothing I've experienced in my lifetime; only the death of the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage comes close. As a filmmaker Akerman was hard to place. She wasn't exactly avant-garde, although she was unmistakably a product of her time in New York in the 1970s, where she shot a delicate and cryptic experimental film called *News From Home*, which she finished in 1976. That was a follow-up to her first two features released a year earlier, both fully unequalled in both their rigour and their tenderness: *Je tu il elle* and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.

When I was six, *Star Wars* was my *Star Wars*; when I was 19, *Jeanne Dielmann* was my *Star Wars*. Akerman's film has the sense of being utterly familiar and also a work that re-writes everything from the ground up, a film after which nothing is really the same. It's 3½ hours long, and details the life of a single mum who turns tricks in her small Brussels apartment to

support herself and her teenage son. We get basically no biographical details, only the titular character Jeanne's daily routine, in incredible detail. The most famous example is when she sits facing the camera and, in a single, static shot, peels a full pot of potatoes. My favourite scene is when she goes to a café, orders a coffee, drinks it, and moves on, again, all in one unmoving, unblinking shot. Akerman's sense of composition is impossibly precise throughout, creating symmetries and tensions in the middle-class landscapes of suburbs, apartment building, bedrooms. When it all comes apart at the end it feels unspeakable. Akerman literally presents it that way inasmuch as the last shot (nearly six minutes long, no cuts, no camera movement) is Jeanne staring off into space at the dining room table, alone, but what's being expressed there is also unspeakable because it has required the entire film's visual tensions to get us there.

I saw *Je tu il elle* a bit later, although it was made in 1975, just before *Jeanne Dielman*. It might seem at first to be as uncompromising as the later film, especially because its black-and-white photography has a severe sparseness to it. But its story of a young woman (played by a 25-year-old Akerman) who wanders through her life in search of awkward sensual experiences never lets you settle into a steady mood. Like *Jeanne Dielman* most of it unfolds in sequences made up of a single shot where the camera never moves, but unlike *Jeanne Dielman* there are moments of powerful sensuality, and the intimacy that can come along with that. The scene where Julie has sex with her ex-girlfriend has a kind of purity that can only be called innocent, unfolding in a small bedroom with basically no intervention on the part of "film grammar": no cutting, no re-framing of any kind, no music past some semi-audible grunting. It matches quite perfectly the scene before, where the two amantes maudites goofily, awkwardly try to decide whether to eat more Nutella. As in *Jeanne Dielman* Akerman was working out the details of modern alienation here. In the later film hints of redemption come in the purity of the visual music that unfolds so slowly over so much time; in this earlier effort the redemption seems to be there all along, as though hiding between each of the drab frames.

The rest of the body of work is just as highly variable, just as indispensable. Akerman made a postmodern musical, and then a deconstruction of it using the same footage and outtakes from the shoot: 1983's *Les Années*

80 and 1986's *Golden 80s*. She shot an experimental documentary behind a still-crumbling Iron Curtain, in search of her Eastern European Jewish roots: 1993's *D'Est*, which became a multi-screen gallery show in 1994. She made videos about racist murders in the USA, and about illegal immigration on that country's southern border: 1999's *Sud* and 2002's *De l'autre côté*. She made a William-Hurt-starring romantic comedy, and a Proust adaptation: 1996's *A Couch in New York* and 2002's *La Captive*. She made dozens of short films. She did TV stuff: her contribution to the French series *Tous les garçons et les filles dans leur âge*, a 60-minute gem called *Portrait d'une jeune fille de la fin des années 60 à Bruxelles*, is by some weird miracle available on youtube, and it really needs to be seen more (most of Akerman's best films are available on DVD, many as part of the Criterion Collection). Throughout her work, the absence or presence of subtitles has almost no effect on its affect, no matter how you did in Core French.

I cannot think of a single filmmaker who worked across that many forms. More importantly, it's not just that Akerman did good work in experimental documentary, feature narrative, short videos, and gallery installations. It's that in each of these utterly disparate forms, you know immediately that you are watching a Chantal Akerman film. At the level of structure they should share nothing, but that's not the case at all. Her oeuvre stands as a lifelong and consistent (not repetitive) engagement with the fullness of cinema, marked by a refusal to be pinned down not only by commercial homogenisation but the equally homogenising forces of avant garde purism. It would be tempting to say that her death marked the end of an era. That's not quite right. Her death marked the end of an idea of what cinema could really, fully be.