THE LONG TAKE



Pamela Hutchinson

@PamHutch

In praise of domestic disaster movies, true masterclasses in world-building

Sometimes it pays to bring a potato-peeler to a gunfight. The recent vibe shift in the canon, Sight and Sound's crowning of Chantal Akerman's 1975 masterpiece Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles as the Greatest Film of All Time last autumn, has thrown off some mistaken ideas about what counts as cinematic action. Anyone who has seen Jeanne Dielman will know that it is powerfully engrossing, a film that takes as its subject the daily routine of a woman's life. It seems to redefine einematic time and space with each precise edit and the anticipation that precedes that cut. Just as Jeanne's routine is painstakingly pieced together, then slashed open.

Hard to ignore, though, that between those slices through the film, Jeanne Dielman offers a long hard look at housework - the invisible labour of generations of women, the action that in most films takes place off screen and out of mind. This is a tendency to regret, because films that linger in the domestic sphere and dwell on the acts of food preparation, cleaning, laundry and childcare can become master-classes in world-building. More than that, they can set the stage for feats of insurrection. A hundred things happen when Delphine Seyrig peels a potato.

Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent film Master of the House (1925) opens with a shock reveal (every bit as coolly compiled as Akerman's film) of the several tasks Ida (Astrid Holm) and her daughter complete in the home before her husband even wakes up to demand his slippers and breakfast. An intertitle describes the "patient wife and mother" as the rightful heroine of the story, despite the ironic title. It seems to anticipate the two distinct close-up montages of disembodied domestic labour in Le Bonheur, a 1965 film by Agnès Varda, cinema's other great poet of the potato. These sequences emphasise both the repetitive labour of housework and the prettifying impact of fresh flowers and pastel bedsheets. Underneath these rigorous edits, Varda slides a sharp comparison of a mother and a stepmother, family life before and after a shattering bereavement.

The kitchen table is, of course, the scene of many of cinema's strongest sensory pleasures: but there is more to food and



Where better than a realm of blades and fire, bubbling oil and gas jets to explore what happens when the long accumulation of oppression precipitates a catastrophe?

its preparation than taste and sustenance. Savour the sly implications of those toxic mushrooms sautéed in butter and folded into a poisonous omelette by Vicky Krieps's Alma in Phantom Thread (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2017) – her most lethal volley in the war fought over the dining table. The most memorable housework scenes in cinema focus, as Akerman does, on the dangers and inequities of domestic labour and weaponise the tools of this unpaid or underpaid trade. Where better than a realm of blades and fire, bubbling oil and gas jets to explore what happens when the long accumulation of oppression precipitates a catastrophe?

Domestic disaster movies were prevalent in early cinema. One of the best early British comedies is *Mary Jane's Mishap* (G. A. Smith, 1903), in which Laura Bayley plays a sleepy housemaid who accidentally (on purpose?) lights the stove with paraffin and is blown sky-high. Finally escaping her

kitchen confinement, Mary Jane explodes and her body parts rain down across the town. She returns to earth as a spectre, free to roam where she pleases.

You can find Mary Jane's Mishap on BFI Player, but for more such scenes, plunder the Kino Lorber box-set 'Cinema's First Nasty Women' and find comediennes such as the character Léontine (played by an unknown actress), who defies all the laws of good housekeeping. In Léontine garde la maison (Romeo Bosetti, 1912), our hoyden heroine is entrusted with a weekend of grown-up, feminine responsibility, but rebels against this indoctrination by smashing the dishes, setting fire to the laundry, flooding the bathroom and losing the baby. Elsewhere, in Victoire a ses nerfs (1907), a housemaid tyrannised by a cruel employer dismantles the instruments of her oppression by destroying every last item of crockery in the kitchen.

This spirit simmers in Akerman and Seyrig's depiction of a housewife reaching a crisis, who will finally express her rage with the sharpest item in her apartment. It's central, however, to Akerman's first film, the short Saute ma ville (1968), a tragedy played as a slow farce. That film, the title of which translates as Blow up My Town, is a direct descendant of Mary Jane's Mishap - and the revolts of Léontine and Victoire. Akerman plays her own slapstick heroine (like Mary Jane, she has a pet cat), clambering on the worktops and creating disorder while mimicking the motions of household chores. As with Mary Jane, she smears shoe polish on her skin. And like Léontine, she empties the cupboards out on to the floor. But all the while she is preparing for her own demise, setting a spark to the deadly gas emitted by her unlit oven. Like Mary Jane before her, she returns in another form after the explosive climax on the soundtrack, Akerman hums a jaunty tune and recites the credits of her own film.

So many films, across the history of cinema, standing ready to ask the question: what happens when women who are confined to the kitchen begin to play with the knives?

Pamela Hutchinson is a freelance critic and film historian