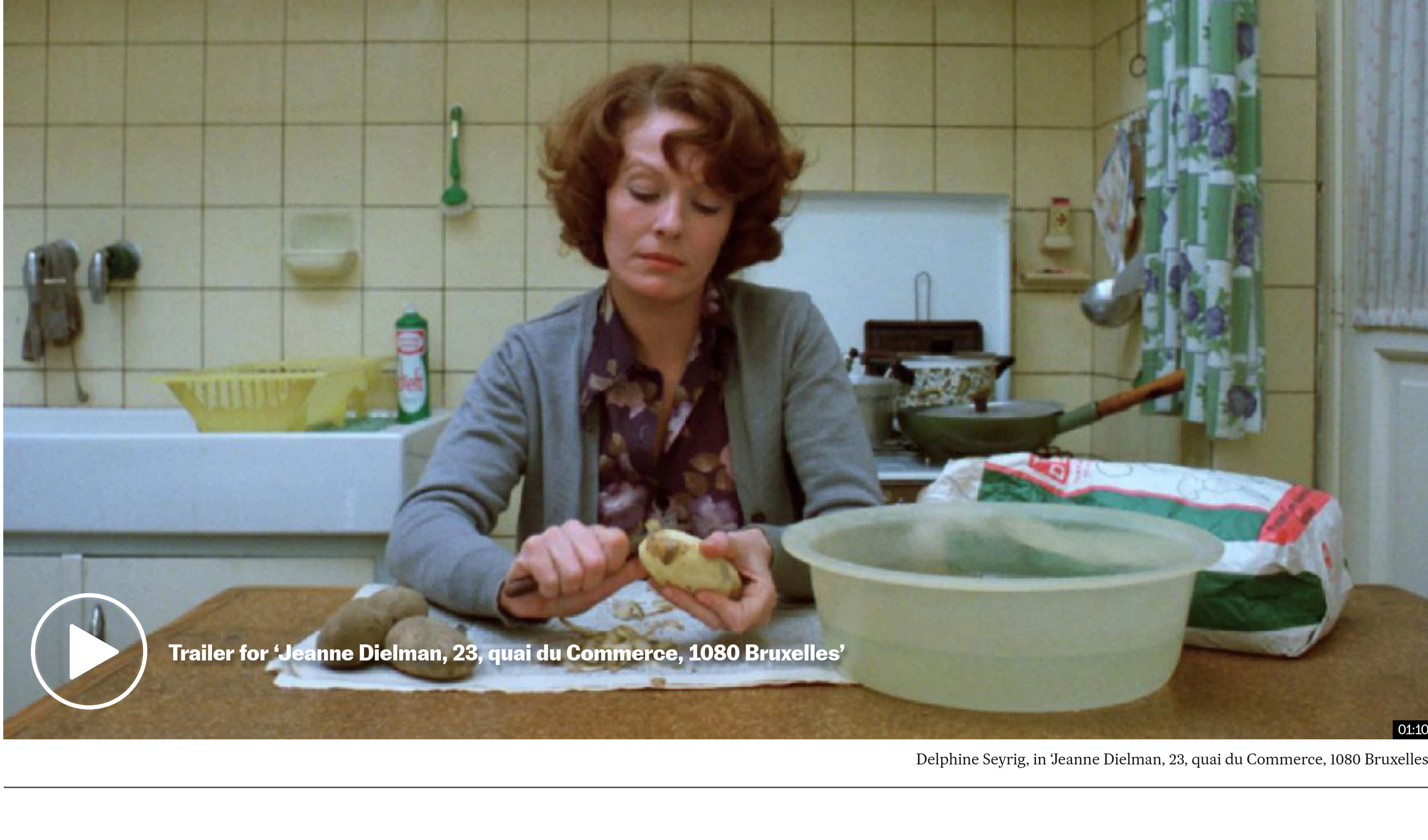


CINEMA >

‘Sight & Sound’ poll rekindles debate about the greatest films of all time

The decennial survey conducted by the British Film Institute’s magazine surprises critics and fans by putting Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* on top



Trailer for ‘Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles’

Delphine Seyrig, in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.



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There is no such thing as the greatest film of all time. Keep this in mind as you read the [results of the survey](#) conducted every 10 years by the [British Film Institute’s *Sight & Sound*](#) magazine. Ever since 1952, *Sight & Sound* has polled critics, historians and filmmakers from all over the world and issued its list of the 100 greatest films of all time. The surprise number one knocked off past winners like *The Bicycle Thief*, *Citizen Kane* and *Vertigo*.

Released in 1975, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* was written and directed by Chantal Akerman when she was just 25 years old. It stars Lebanese-French actress Delphine Seyrig, playing a lonely Belgian housewife who barely speaks during the three-plus hours of the film.

[Jeanne Dielman](#) broke new ground in telling a fiercely feminist story. Akerman, who committed suicide in 2015 when she was 65, wanted to portray her outrage about female oppression. She did this by focusing her camera on a mother’s three mind-numbing days of household chores and mundane routines. When Akerman was asked what distinguished her films from those made by men, she replied: “The difference is that a man would never have made this film. They learn different values from the day they are born, and a woman washing dishes is not art.” A tireless cinematic experimenter, Akerman sought to shatter the [prevailing societal portrayals of women](#).

Sight & Sound’s survey has rekindled a prickly debate that now must contend with our contemporary culture wars. This time around, the magazine conducted a much broader survey – 1,639 participants – including this writer. This is almost double the number surveyed in 2012, which in turn was much broader than the previous decade’s survey. While *Sight & Sound* says that this makes room for new sensibilities and gender and racial perspectives, the survey’s detractors argue that it’s a calculated strategy to precipitate a biased and opportunistic destruction of the cinematic canon.

Only two female filmmakers made *Sight & Sound’s* previous top 100 lists – Akerman and Claire Denis, whose 1998 film *Beau Travail* climbed this year from 78th to seventh place. One of the biggest surprises of this year’s survey is the number of women who made the grade: Céline Sciamma, Agnès Varda, [Jane Campion](#), Věra Chytilová, Julie Dash, Maya Deren and Barbara Loden. But pioneers like Dorothy Arzner and Leni Riefenstahl dropped off the list. More Black and Asian filmmakers are in the top 100, and an astonishing number of recent releases like Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight*, Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, [Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*](#) and Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

Killing off the forefathers

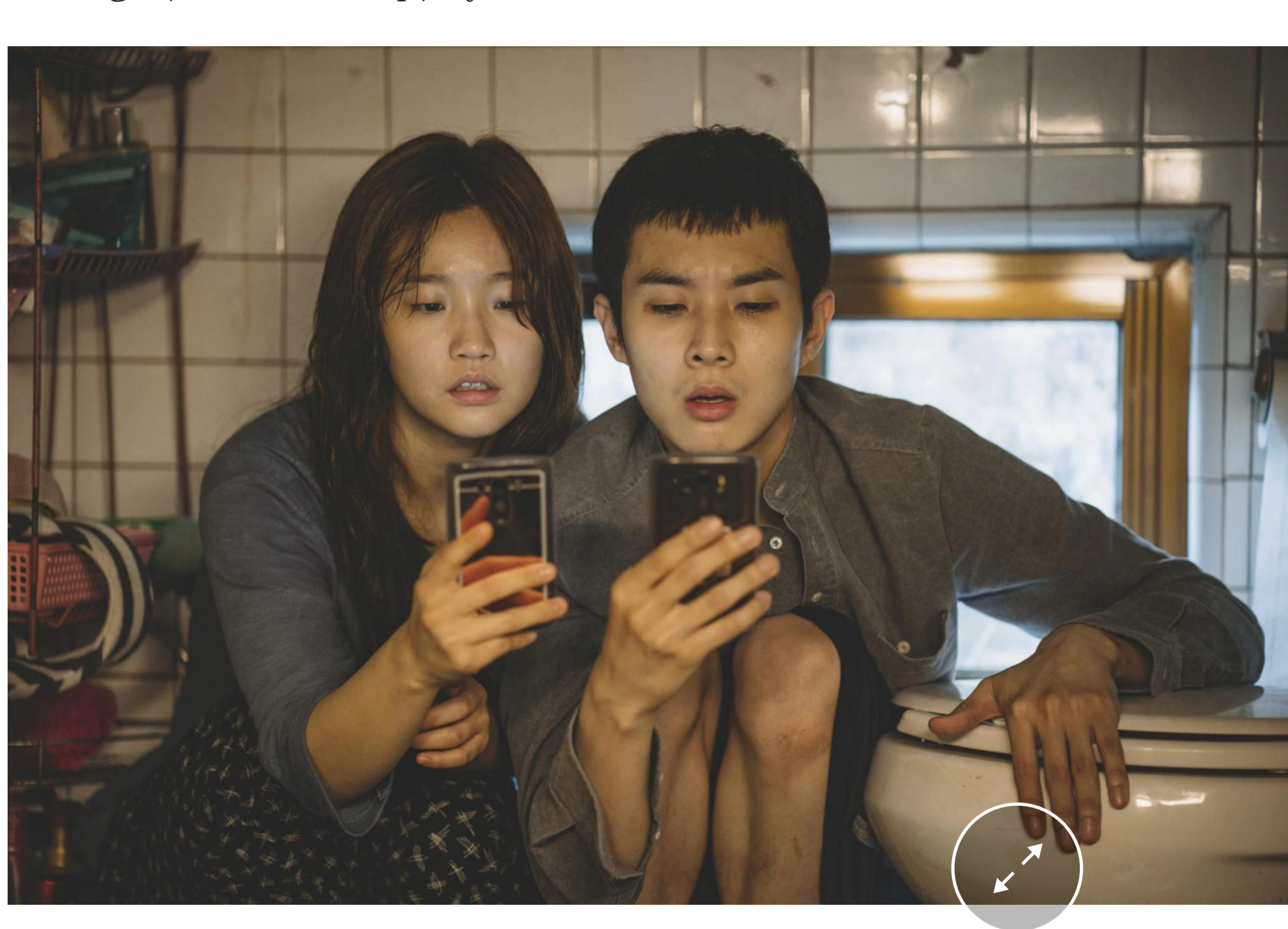
“There is a clear tendency to kill off the [cinematic] forefathers,” said Esteve Riambau about the top 100 list. A historian, critic and director of Barcelona’s Filmoteca de Catalunya film archive, Riambau said: “While the lists of the 1960s and 70s also killed off some of the forefathers, this one is genocidal, an indiscriminate and unjust extermination of the classics.” Riambau claims that the list is full of “political, generational and gender” biases, and has an obvious amnesia problem. “Does anyone really understand why *Parasite* is on the list, and not one film by [Ernst] Lubitsch or [Howard] Hawks? When the details of how everyone voted are released in January, perhaps we will be able to better understand this sham.” Riambau believes that shaking up the canon is necessary, and the broadly representative survey merits consideration. “But it demonstrates a complete disregard of cinema’s popular dimensions and an entrenched militancy and ghetto mentality.” The predominance of American and French language films on the list is, “a clear reflection of the cultural studies programs that American universities began offering in the 1980s,” said Riambau. Or as American literary critic Harold Bloom once put it, “Eskimo lesbian studies.”

American filmmaker and writer Paul Schrader (who wrote the screenplay for *Taxi Driver*) was one of the first to criticize the survey results, which he thinks were distorted by political correctness and woke agendas. Schrader says this does a disservice to *Jeanne Dielman*, a film he admires and considers one of the greats. Veteran American film and literary critic Janet Maslin tweeted her support for Schrader’s critique and added that the survey reflects all the worst vices of “film students and *Criterion Channel* junkies... Good Lord, the world is much bigger.” On the other hand, *The New Yorker’s* Richard Brody praised the survey: “Despite regrettable absences (Cassavetes, for example)... [the survey] provides a more lucid view of film history.”

“It doesn’t seem to me that anything too serious has happened,” notes Josetxo Cerdán, director of Filmoteca Española, the Spanish Ministry of Culture’s film institute. “The silent films that have fallen off the list are *An Andalusian Dog*, *Intolerance* and *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*. In these times, the absence of D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* is understandable.” Just as Leni Riefenstahl’s enormous influence on cinema has been [overshadowed by her affiliation with the Nazis](#), “Griffith’s racism has also impugned his place in the canon,” said Cerdán. He also thinks that including any recent film is highly questionable. “We need time to reflect and decide which films have lasting value and which ones don’t. To me, what is more indicative of the shifting perceptions of cinema is that Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* replaced his *Raging Bull* on the list, because *Goodfellas* is much more firmly embedded in the postmodern tradition.”

Manuel Asín, the artistic director for the Punto de Vista International Documentary Film Festival (Pamplona, Spain), says the diversity represented in the top 100 list is a sign that people are more knowledgeable about cinema. “Contemporary films incorporate more and more influences from the films from the past,” said Asín. The internet provides neutral and open access to the history of cinema, which has brought many [forgotten gems](#) to the forefront of best-film lists. “It will be interesting to get the detailed voting results to see which films just missed making the top 100, understand the general trends, and see how experimental cinema fared in the overall survey,” said Asín.

Mexican critic Fernanda Solórzano admits to having mixed feelings about lists that produce what she calls unnecessary controversies. “I understand that these lists are unintended to be fun and provocative, but I don’t know if all this effort to establish a cinematic canon is worthwhile, even if the goal is just to shake things up. I think the laudable inclusion of more women voters undoubtedly influenced the outcome. As a female critic, it goes without saying that I’m glad to see many more women directors on the list. But as a voter, it puts me between a rock and a hard place. I didn’t vote for any of them [the women], which doesn’t mean that I’m not in favor of increasing awareness of their work. Had I known that the objective was to unearth underrated masterpieces directed by women, I would have voted for *La ciénaga* (or, *The Swamp*) by Lucrecia Martel.”



A still from Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*, which made *Sight & Sound’s* top 100 list

Victor Erice’s *The Spirit of the Beehive* is the only film by a Spanish or Latin American director to make the top 100 list. “This is proof that the magazine’s ‘tireless effort’ to achieve greater voter diversity was misguided or poorly executed,” said Solórzano. “How is it possible that even Buñuel doesn’t appear on the list? The complete absence of Latin American cinema surprised me more than the unexpected coronation of *Jeanne Dielman*.” Manuel Asín believes that this “discredits the overall results,” while Josetxo Cerdán said: “The list seems to serve US and French geopolitical interests. Everything else has fallen by the wayside – Italy, Latin America...”

A few weeks ago, filmmaker Nina Menkes released *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power*, a documentary that dissects “[male gaze](#),” a term coined by Laura Mulvey in 1975, the same year that *Jeanne Dielman* premiered. Mulvey is a film theorist who argues that within film, males are the active viewer and females become passive subjects. In a special issue of *Sight & Sound*, Mulvey wrote an important defense of *Jeanne Dielman*, arguing that besides being an important film in the tradition of experimental and avant-garde cinema, it is also a clear reflection of the new power of the feminist movement that deserves to be celebrated. Mulvey thinks that Akerman, who also made the list with her 1977 avant-garde documentary, *News from Home* (number 52), rightfully deserves her place at the top because of *Jeanne Dielman’s* unequivocal statement about the “the misogyny and oppression” that plagues film portrayals of women.

Brainwashed includes an interview with African-American director Julie Dash, who made the list with *Daughters of the Dust*, a cult favorite that premiered at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival. Dash urges women in film to break away from the bondage of the cinematic canon and quoted Audre Lorde’s dictum, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”