

Letters

The following is not a letter to the editors of The Downtown Review; rather it is a response—written in the form of a letter—to an article that appeared in the Spring (1979) Double Issue.

Dear Ellen Lesser,

After reading your review of Margarethe von Trotta's *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*, I felt compelled to write a response that might alter your sense of despair or discouragement. It's been a number of months since I've seen the film, so I feel more comfortable discussing the philosophical issues it raises rather than analysing the cinematography, editing, etc., the specifics of which I remember only vaguely.

Given a slightly different interpretation, particularly of the ending, the film left me with a feeling of relief and elation—though not an unconditional, romantic elation. I was delighted by the irony implicit in the "happy ending;" by the fact that the film so consciously reduced the role of the Hero/ine as the emotional or intellectual axis (the characters were all connected through Christa, but she was *never* more sophisticated than, or less dependent on, them than they were on her; and by Trotta's satire of the usual "action-packed adventure" film.

I have never seen a less glamorous bank robbery, a more pedestrian escape (as they drive through Germany bored, homesick and confused), a more anticlimactic chase-and-capture (instead of cowboy boots and a submachine gun, she's carrying groceries), or a more subtle "rescue" scene. Essentially a road film, it succeeds as a critique of the boy-hits-the-highway routine. Christa drifts from one temporary home to another in her escape, but unlike the anonymous motels, one-night stands, and shattered friendships in Wenders' *Alice in the Cities*, or the bleak refuge in Herzog's *Stroszek*, her stopping points are the homes of people with whom she has constructive, challenging exchanges. Even when von Trotta concedes to our desire for glamorous scenery by sending Christa off to sunny Portugal, she lands her in a socialist farming collective. In contrast to Herzog and Wenders, von Trotta/Christa never indulges in existentialist sentimentality about her "alienation." She doesn't enjoy it, and she does have some sense of an alternative: the day care center, her women friends, her daughter.

Only a few short scenes occur in or in front of the day care center, but it's the central location of the film, both ideologically and physically. Christa says

that she started the center for the children, but she obviously needs it (and what it represents) as desperately as they do. Her journey and her questions keep bringing her back to it, but, as an outlaw, she has forfeited her access to the center and must observe it secretly, from the outside. She re-enters it only on the day that she comes out of hiding (and is apprehended). Her physical isolation is consistent with her emotional isolation. The robbery was an essential act of defiance or outrage, but she did it contrary to the will of the other women at the center, and without their support. Subsequently, she rediscovers her friendship with Ingrid only to deny it at a critical moment and flee, alone, to the empty apartment. At first it seems a necessary retreat, but it becomes a self-destructive withdrawal from those who could help her and who need her. The connecting thread of the film, the motivation for all the action, is Christa's desperate attempt to understand the source(s) of her alienation and ambivalence. Admitting our fears and confusions publicly (i.e., in a film) may be revealing the dirty laundry, but I prefer that to the leftist "poetics" that turns a Dylan into a Jesus freak. For who among us doesn't falter or retreat periodically?

You suggest that she hadn't waited long enough in the apartment because she's captured immediately afterwards. I think rather that she'd waited long enough, that her return to the (day care) center is inevitable and that, like Odysseus, if she wants to get home desperately enough she must be willing to meet the enemy face to face. Unlike Odysseus, however, she returns without the reassurance of protection by an omnipotent goddess of war, and discovers to her astonishment that Lena is on her side. That encounter stands as the final, and initial, test for *both* women.

Lena's stoicism is the antithesis of Christa's righteous indignation. Their personalities are very successfully counterposed throughout the film but they share in common a stubborn curiosity, a willingness to ask questions of themselves and others. In her austere passion (revealed so precisely in the scene of her alone at home listening to *Madame Butterfly*), Lena's way of life is similar to that of strong, unconventional women who—as much by choice as by default—enter the convent. Her persistent and voluntary exposure to the women at the day care center, to Christa's unorthodox mother and especially to Christa is an awakening to a range of ideas, emotions and behavior that was previously unknown to her, though perhaps secretly desired.

There is an element of eroticism in Lena's connection with Christa, from the first shot of her staring up at, and being held by, Christa until the

final moment when she clears Christa of complicity, and thereby becomes an accomplice. Unlike other recent feature films (especially *Julia*, *Nea* and *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*), I didn't find the suggestion of eroticism between Lena and Christa or between Ingrid and Christa either a concession or a titillation, but rather a result of the profound involvement that they have in each other's lives. If the film is suggesting that sexual as well as platonic love grows quite naturally from a shared vision of life, I can't disagree.

And just as so many of us haven't allowed for the possibility that certain "types" or classes of women would/will become feminists, Christa has not a second but a *rude* awakening in finding herself quite literally saved by a woman whom she had presumed to be her enemy.

I think the timing of the "rescue" scene is purposefully awkward, unsettling, almost anticlimactic. There is an eclipse, or ten-second delay, so that the ramifications of Lena's complicity and Christa's freedom are felt just a bit too late to give us that cathartic rush that signals "The End." I went twice to the film; both times, scattered applause fell hesitantly from the audience. Confusion. There we were at another beginning (no apocalypse now). We had reached a peak that would serve, in the film as in our lives, simply as the base for the next climb.

You describe Christa "staring ahead, not betraying a flicker of what could have been joy, relief, sisterhood," but I saw shock and irony in her expression. How could she conceivably *have* reacted at such a moment, when all the disparate threads of her despair and hope collided? Her strange connection with this woman (both of whom had held the other in a life-and-death situation) and her new-found freedom to continue the struggle (instead of becoming a martyr in prison) form the complex

foundation of her future. The pact between them was in their eyes; words might have betrayed either of them, and exposed their collusion to the police. And how naive it would have been to have them walk off into the sunrise together. In ending it as she did, Trotta doesn't appease us with orgasmic release or the vainglorious double suicide of a Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid.

I hope that I'm not giving von Trotta undue credit, but I disagree with your pessimistic rendering of the end. You say that Christa's graffiti, "Be Prepared to Wait," "is still on the wall for her," and that the others have caught up with her and now all will wait (patiently, femininely) for a mass social movement. The "uprising of the masses" is a well-tended *myth*; at the end, when you saw it being reintroduced and validated, I found it most aggressively criticized. The proverbial masses are none other than Lena, Christa, Ingrid and *us*, with all our flaws and disagreements. Throughout the film von Trotta avoids the usual rhetoric about "politicos" and "the enemy," and it seems unwarranted to think that in the end she would belittle the awakening—the *intelligence*—of those women and reduce them to waiting helplessly for The Movement. Instead of futile cravings, she asks that we learn to respect the gradual, difficult, but spiraling involvement of *individuals*, who may be catalysed by an "extremist" (Christa the bank robber) but who can teach her as much as she teaches them. Von Trotta isn't a Billy Graham type with a "Message for the 1980's," but I think that her portrait of the complex relationship between political involvement and one's personal life is much more sophisticated and pragmatic than anything I've found in other films. I hope that our ambivalence, our caution and even our cynicism will strip the superficial romance from leftist politics and "political" films.

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