

Ticket of No Return (*Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, 1979)

Stefanie Diekmann

dir. Ulrike Ottinger; prod. Tabea Blumenschein, Ulrike Ottinger; screenplay Ulrike Ottinger; photography Ulrike Ottinger; music Peer Raben. 35mm, color, 107 mins. Autorenfilm-Produktionsgemeinschaft, distrib. Basis-Film-Verleih.

Bildnis einer Trinkerin is the memorable first part of Ulrike Ottinger's Berlin trilogy, a project she would continue with *Freak Orlando* (1981) and → *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse* (*The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press*; 1984). The three films are connected by a programmatically eclectic and anti-naturalistic mode of representation, a penchant for theatricality, and a strong affinity to the tableau vivant. (In all these aspects, they are much closer to French avant-garde cinema than to the majority of German films of the 1970s and 80s). They are also marked by a certain ambiguity of gender roles and gender relations (most notably in *Dorian Gray*) and the introduction of very attractive and enigmatic protagonists.

If *Dorian Gray*, the third film in the series, is dominated by the presence of Veruschka von Lehndorff, model, muse, and icon of the 1960s and 70s, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* is largely dedicated to the striking and highly stylized persona of Tabea Blumenschein, model, muse, icon, and fashion designer in her own right and one of the key figures in the West Berlin avant-garde and underground circles of the 1970s and 80s. The collaboration between her and Ottinger, who cast Blumenschein in several of her early films, started before the Berlin trilogy and is constitutive for films like *Die Betörung der blauen Matrosen* (1975) and *Madame X: Eine absolute Herrscherin* (1977). However, although cinema was at its center, this cooperation included much more: notably costume and fashion design, various sorts of roleplay before the camera, photo shootings, social events, as well as an ongoing exchange with many avant-garde artists and designers from the Berlin scene like Claudia Skoda, Peer Raben, Magdalena Montezuma, and others.

In recent years, the importance of that scene and its role in the cultural and art history of the city has been an object of increased interest, documented by exhibitions like *Claudia Skoda—Dressed to Thrill* (Kulturforum Berlin 2021) (Bommert), with



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a number of photographs by Ottinger from the late 1970s, and the exhibition on Tabea Blumenschein as a fine artist (Berlinische Galerie 2022). The films from that period, always a part of Ottinger retrospectives in cultural institutions all over the world, are therefore complemented by an ongoing exploration of a larger field of artistic practices and figures, all part of a near-mythical period before the rediscovery (and, some say, commodification) of Berlin after the fall of the wall.

The Berlin of *Bildnis* is decidedly pre-fall: a dark, derelict, hermetic place, which is both backdrop and environment to the quest of Ottinger's nameless heroine (Blumenschein) who, at the beginning of the film, decides to purchase a 'Ticket of no Return' to the divided city. »Aller—jamais retour«: this, the heroine's only explicit pronouncement throughout the film, is followed by a sequence filmed at Tegel airport and another announcement, now in the form of a voice-over that tells everything there is to tell about the following interaction between the protagonist and the city of Berlin: »She« (described as »a woman of great beauty, ancient dignity and raphaelite harmony«) has come to this place to pursue a passion, and one passion only, namely drinking. If this also implies that she will drink herself to death, the possibility is not made explicit; but some of the following scenes (falls, tumbles, moments of absence) certainly point in that direction.

In terms of melodrama, it is important that *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* starts at a moment when conflict and narrative are already over. The protagonist who arrives in Berlin in a spectacular attire, appears neither broken nor agitated nor in any other particular state but essentially calm, although slightly melancholic. There may have been drama (a loss, a conflict, a rupture), and there may have been states (of love, hatred, despair, desertion), but if »She« remains without a name, she also remains without a backstory and, therefore, without a backstory wound that would make her more accessible to the spectators of the film: »The white protagonist of *Bildnis* is not introduced in terms of her biographical specificity—we are never given a single concrete detail about her past—but rather in terms of what might be called her »mission« (Silverman 47). In her strange and self-contained presence, the heroine of *Bildnis* is closer to certain screen personae of the 1920s and 30s: the detached, inaccessible characters played by actresses like Gloria Swanson and, a few years later, Marlene Dietrich (especially in films by Josef von Sternberg like *Morocco*, *Dishonored*, *Shanghai Express*). In the same line, her drinking spree is presented as a project that is carried out calmly, coolly, and systematically; excessive, maybe, but never to a degree that would affect »her« attractiveness and the essential *ennui*. (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who certainly knew how to appreciate both melodrama and stardom, loved *Bildnis* and declared himself to be the film's biggest fan [Rickels 13]).

Bildnis proposes a concept of melodrama that differs in several aspects from the well-established idea of a »tale [...] of sound and fury« (Elsaesser). In the first place, there is very little drama, if by »drama« we are to understand the actions of a protagonist who makes a spectacle of herself or articulates her state of mind via the expression of rage or lament. In the second place, while *Bildnis*, as a film, is neither quiet nor withdrawn (there are several noisy characters and noisy scenes), the protagonist herself certainly is. Not much of a talker and even less of a weeper, joker, fighter, she prefers to sit by herself, detached both from her surroundings and from her own persona, rarely without a glass (which is sometimes replaced by a bottle), never looking for attention but always a striking presence against the bleak backdrop of yet another location in Berlin.

In Ottinger's very visual cinema, the spectacle is not in the behavior of the heroine but in her looks and attire. It is also in the settings, scattered all over West Berlin, that essentially walled-off city which, in the late 1970s, offered a unique backdrop to the story about the beauty who came to town to drink herself to death. Many scenes in *Bildnis* are filmed against a view of the Zoo, the Tiergarten, the Westhafen, the Wannsee, and the Spree. However, at no point do these scenes create the impression of openness or escape, so frequently associated with the outdoors in films from → *Applause* to → *All That Heaven Allows*. Instead, the very literal enclosure of West Berlin may be imagined as the very reason why »She« chose that city as her final destination; and an aspect of claustrophobia is clearly present in Ottinger's *mise-en-scène* of urban landscapes and locales. (»The essence of loneliness presented in the guise of the city,« as the film critic Norbert Jochum wrote in *Die Zeit*). The melodrama, for the longest time the no. 1 spectacle of the interior, is thereby transposed to a different environment which, nevertheless, still functions along the parameters of containment and isolation.

Against the exquisite seediness and gloominess of Berlin, the protagonist's attire appears all the more memorable. Dressed to drink, dressed to die, dressed as if her wardrobe had been designed to hold herself together as long as possible, the protagonist, in her make-up of white (face), red (lipstick), and black (eyeliner and eyebrows) will change from one extraordinary item into the next and is never seen in the same dress twice. These dresses, all designed by Blumenschein herself, are evocative of grand entrances and even greater exits: Theatrical, operatic, and always extravagant, they have the effect of keeping the possibility of drama present, although no dramatic encounter ever takes place. And while the protagonist's wardrobe seems to imply a certain promise (of a scene that will live up to the ensemble of lacquer, silk, veils, and sculptural designs), it may just as well be reminiscent of affective states and dramatic intensities that lie in the past and will not be revived in the film. The detached, almost ironical attitude towards any signs of emotional outburst is particularly visible in a scene, in which »She« (dressed up in a multi-piece suit of yellow lacquer, complete with hat and gloves) spends some time drinking at a corner table in a café, before she and her temporary drinking companion both throw the content of their glasses against the café windows that face the street. If their following expulsion from the premises is no surprise, the action itself remains all the more enigmatic: unmotivated by an event or exchange, a gesture that explains nothing about the heroine who immediately returns to her attitude of detachment and disinterest.

The sense of stillness and deadness that marks the ending of famous film melodramas from the 1950s like Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) or → *Imitation of Life* (1959) is present in *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* from the beginning. In this regard, the film resembles some of the more radical *auteur* portrayals of women protagonists at the end of their journey like *Sue* (1997) with Sue Thompson or *Shit Year* (2010) with Ellen Barkin. As far as its affective economy is concerned, Ottinger's first Berlin film is evasive and hard to grasp: a heroine who appears aloof and unresponsive, a series of encounters which remain largely inconclusive, a dramaturgy of purposefully disconnected scenes, a decidedly anti-psychological approach to characters and interactions, and an ending that is both uncompromising and unexplained. This is not a weepie nor is it a film that encourages identification, compassion, or complicity with the protagonist. As a matter of fact, the self-sufficiency and single-mindedness of Blumenschein's character suggest that »She« may not be in need of any spectators, neither within nor outside of the film.

Notwithstanding the brittle and experimental quality of *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, the film was very well received by the press (although some comments betray a certain confusion). It was also an important step in what would become the most outstanding career of a woman filmmaker in German avant-garde cinema, with a large body of work, both documentary and fiction, both in and outside the cinema, continuously developed over the following decades. In contrast, the trajectory of Tabea Blumenschein, who returned to the screen in a number of smaller parts (one in Ottinger's *Dorian Gray*) and tried her hand at several film projects of her own, was far more uneven: never a duplication of her most famous role but much closer to the experience of precarity that looms at the edges of *Bildnis* without ever coming fully into view.

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