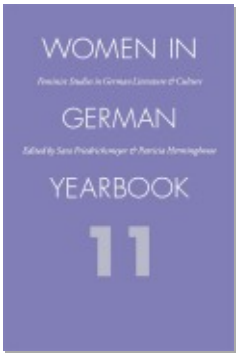
PROJECT MUSE®

Enacting the Different Voice: *Christa Klages* and Feminist History



Jenifer K. Ward

Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture, Volume 11, 1995, pp. 49-65 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/wgy.1995.0006

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/392906/summary

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

Enacting the Different Voice: *Christa Klages* and Feminist History

Jenifer K. Ward

This article examines Margarethe von Trotta's first film, *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1977), as an exemplary document of late 1970s feminist thought. It asserts that von Trotta's narrative can be understood in light of the early work of Carol Gilligan on gender and moral development, and goes on to argue that von Trotta uses this notion of a gendered moral code to critique and recuperate a Christian ethical stance through her characterizations. The article also re-evaluates the (German) reception of von Trotta and her film. (JKW)

The "myth of Germany"—as it was articulated in West German cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s—has been the subject of a number of recent contributions to the rich field of criticism surrounding cultural attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.[1] The early 1990s also saw the appearance of long overdue books that treated the works of German women filmmakers in a sustained way.[2] It is in the intersection of these two trends that I wish to situate this essay, which treats Margarethe von Trotta's first independent film, *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1977), as a different evocation of that myth of Germany.

Christa Klages appeared almost twenty years ago, in a time of great political turmoil. It was released at approximately the same time as one of the watershed films in the history of New German Cinema, *Germany in Autumn* (Filmverlag der Autoren, 1978), which responded to the events of fall 1977 in the form of a collaborative work by several filmmakers. *Germany in Autumn* was completed in an intense few weeks and consisted of individual episodes created by many of the major players in New German Cinema, among them Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Edgar Reitz, Alexander Kluge, and Volker Schlöndorff. The episodes varied greatly from documentary and quasi-documentary to autobiographical to allegorical to fictional, but all of them responded to events of the fall. In short, those events were the following: after the kidnapping and murder by terrorists of Hans Martin Schleyer, the head of the West German Confederation of

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

Industry, an act which also involved the hijacking of a Lufthansa jet and its subsequent liberation by special German "stormtrooper" units, three members of the Red Army Faction were found dead in the maximum-security Stammheim prison.

The political backdrop against which these events were played out was marked by the remnants of the past and the fears associated with those memories, both for the Right and the Left. According to Richard McCormick, the 1967 murder of Benno Ohnesorg during the height of the student movement and the subsequent speech given by Gudrun Ensslin denouncing that murder—a speech that contributed to the founding of the RAF—still had great resonance for the Left. As the state cracked down on the RAF in 1977, those memories of ten years ago were stirred. On the Right, memories of the revolutionary activity after World War I were evoked. McCormick rightly perceives the circular nature of the fears:

> Why such tremendous fears—on both the right and the left—should have been prevalent is at first glance not clear to the foreigner. The answer has to do with the relation of the events in 1977 to what are undoubtedly the greatest (German) crimes of the century: the scuttling of German democracy by National Socialism, the resultant persecution of political dissidents and Jews; and the eventual mass extermination of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and others. The fears of the Right go back at least to the revolutionary unrest after World War I in Germany; these fears contributed to the ultimate success of the Nazis. That success in turn explains the fears of the German Left (179–80).

As rumors circulated about the Schleyer murder and the cause of death of the RAF prisoners—suicide or murder, depending on which end of the ideological spectrum one was located—West Germany seemed close to an ideologically motivated civil war.[3] These deaths serve as the structural glue for the disparate episodes of *Germany in Autumn*, which were framed by documentary footage of the funerals of Schleyer at the outset and the members of the Red Army Faction at the end.

Christa Klages serves as a good companion document to *Germany in Autumn*; whereas the latter provides an immediate—in part, documentary—collaborative response to political events, *Christa Klages* represents a narrativized and fictional—some would say melodramatic—one. Attention to the reception of von Trotta's film affords us yet another glimpse into the culture of this period, both in terms of the public discourse surrounding the events of that fall and in terms of how opinions about this film would come to shape and reflect later attention to her work.[4] While her film also deals with the political climate of Germany at this time, it does so from a perspective that takes seriously the promise of feminism for the betterment of society. Von Trotta's film enacts—through a fictionalized narrative—the transformative potential of feminist theories

about the "nature" of women's ethical and moral decision-making in the late 1970s in Germany and the U.S., particularly theories developed by Carol Gilligan and Margarete Mitscherlich. While both authors' major works appear after *Christa Klages,* and cannot, therefore, have influenced Von Trotta's thinking directly, the theories contained in them were already fermenting, indeed on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, von Trotta's film can be seen as a document of feminist history grounded in a specific historical, national context, but also in a context of international theorizing about women's morality.

In *Christa Klages,* von Trotta presents the utopianism of the feminist movement as a way of intervening into what she saw as a calcified political culture. She constructs in the character of Christa Klages a kind of vigilante messiah (her name also embodies the accusatory,[5] yet ultimately Christ-like nature of her character), whose actions represent the "female" approach to the solution of problems posited by Gilligan and Mitscherlich. This approach is then depicted in contrast to the "male" approach embodied by the character of Hans and the various bureaucrats in the film narrative.

This essay will begin, then, with a summary of the reception of *Christa Klages* in the German popular press, will go on to outline Gilligan's theory of gendered moral development, and then offer a reading of the film based on the links between that theory and the Biblical parallels found in the film text. What von Trotta ultimately does with *Christa Klages* is to construct a world in which two seemingly separate threads are intertwined—feminist psychology on the one hand and Christian ethics on the other. By weaving the two together, von Trotta is able to create a utopian vision in which "female" ways of being in the world unfetter the notion of Christian *salvation* from its patriarchal base.

Von Trotta was inspired to make *Christa Klages* by a real incident concerning a day-care worker who had robbed a bank to save her financially troubled day-care center. Von Trotta stated:

> The point of departure is the case of the Munich bank robber Margit Czenki. I simply couldn't get this character out of my head. Ultimately, though, I approached the story in a different way: I don't depict the developments up to the bank robbery, but those that come after. And all of that is purely fictional (Naefe).

As in most of her later films, von Trotta makes clear in the case of *Christa Klages* that she is less interested in depicting real historical events than in depicting the effects of those events on people, particularly women. Even as von Trotta concerns herself with the "personal" aspects of German history, however, the backdrop of larger events is always present. What concerns her is the way in which "history"—be it political, social, personal, or cultural—moves characters beyond themselves in

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

catalytic fashion, enabling them to perform actions, adopt new visions of themselves and their place in the world, or come to new understandings, which had been impossible or unattainable at the beginning of their filmic journeys.

An equally important message is that these transformations occur when women learn from each other. In *Christa Klages* the three central women characters move in and out of each other's lives as the film progresses. Although they may not be in constant contact with each other, the imprints they leave on each other are indelible, and while the ultimate moment of "awakening" for each of them may occur in isolation from the other women, it is clear that the process leading up to that moment is a result of solidarity or mutual influence.

Aside from the events specific to fall 1977, the more general atmosphere pervading Germany in the mid- to late 1970s, including the "Radikalenerlaß"[6] of 1972 and the prevalent labeling of perceived leftists as "sympathizers," made the subject matter of *Christa Klages* quite provocative. Indeed, the bank robbery itself is not the central point of the film. Far more important are Christa's motives for this deed, which are portrayed as honorable; her attempts to implicate others in her scheme and the degree to which the others appear cowardly or hopelessly bourgeois for not recognizing the honor of the deed; and the negative portrayal of the State. Perhaps most important of all is the extent to which Christa ultimately "radicalizes" those around her, a process that is represented sympathetically by von Trotta.

Reception

The provocative nature of the film is reflected in reviews in the German popular press. Positive reviews generally fell into two categories: those that praised von Trotta's sensitive rendering of the complexity of the German political atmosphere, and those that avoided discussions of history and politics altogether, seeing the film instead in terms of its humanist/utopian message.[7] Negative critiques (of which there were few) also fell into two camps: those that called into question von Trotta's refusal to "take sides" or otherwise make explicit a moral position and, similarly, those that criticized the film for its refusal to take a more pointed stand against what Hans C. Blumenberg calls "decent society":

> ...It is true that *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages,* which was warmly received at its premiere at the Berlin Film Festival, is based on the real-life case of kindergarten teacher Margit Czenki, whom the tabloids have nicknamed "Bank Lady" and for whom decent society has made it virtually impossible to get on with a "normal" life. Nevertheless, this did not turn out to be a political film: rather a friendly,

> all-too-friendly leftist fairy tale, which fails to really offend anyone, not even its state-supported co-producer WDR.

Blumenberg goes on to criticize what he sees as cliché-ridden plot construction, calling it "naive cops-and-robbers stuff" even as he admits von Trotta's remarkable technical and stylistic facility in her first independent effort. The most striking aspect of Blumenberg's article, however, is that it prefigures a common trend in subsequent reviews of von Trotta's films, especially those that draw on real historical events and personalities for their subject matter, namely a use of the subjunctive to describe the film that would have been more historically "true" or somehow more appropriate. His review begins: "This could have become a bitter, angry film...." This tendency is much stronger in reviews of von Trotta's later films *Marianne and Juliane* and *Rosa Luxemburg*, since Margit Czenki did not command the same attention as figures like Gudrun Ensslin (upon whose life *Marianne and Juliane* was based) or Rosa Luxemburg. More importantly, Czenki certainly did not occupy the role of hero or anti-hero for segments of the German population as Ensslin and Luxemburg still do. Nevertheless, even here we begin to see some of the contested nature of von Trotta's characterizations.

Just as Blumenberg sees *Christa Klages* as cliché-ridden, other reviewers—the overwhelming majority—praise the degree to which it is *not* formulaic.[8] Most reviewers laud the film for avoiding an ideological heavy-handedness, especially in its portrayal of feminist issues. In fact, most reviewers use quite a bit of space in their articles to embrace the feminist content on the one hand, and to distance themselves and the film from the women's movement on the other:

> Although the feminine perspective (including its irrationality) dominates in this film, we are not dealing with a brittle "women's lib" sermon. Because: even with all the awkward unhappiness and painful realizations, the dialogue does not suffer from a lack of humor, exactitude, charm, and—this is a rarity in German films—lightness. No stiffness, no excess, no incessant digging in old wounds, rather a gentle touch and a quiet turning of the pages (Auffermann).

This article is quite typical and speaks not only to *Christa Klages*, but also to common assumptions about the nature of feminist cinema: it is perceived to be irrational, rigid, pedantic, humorless, and vague, and its methods are perceived to include persistent opening up of old wounds. It is important to keep in mind that these are the earliest discussions of von Trotta's films in a public arena. The fact that they also contain negative appraisals of women's cinema in general and that von Trotta's film is being lifted, more or less, above such ideologically "tainted" cinema by its reviewers in the mainstream press helps to explain the later ambivalence of feminists toward von Trotta. If the terms of the discourse around

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

these films are being defined by the mainstream press, in other words, and if these terms set up a dichotomy with non-feminist cinema (and von Trotta) on one side and feminist cinema on the other, then it appears that von Trotta has been co-opted by the mainstream.

If von Trotta's intention was to remain in solidarity with other feminist filmmakers, she made a crucial miscalculation early on. In two separate interviews she refused the designation "woman's film" for her work. In response to a direct question as to whether *Christa Klages* was a "woman's film" or not, she replied simply: "One cannot distinguish between the woman's point of view and politics, just as one cannot separate the private and the public!" (Naefe). In another interview, she described women's cinema as a "thought ghetto" (Mudrich). Even though she was offering statements that reflected positions articulated by the women's movement, she did so in a troubling context. First, she clearly wanted to redeem her work for mainstream viewers, knowing the implications of the label "feminist" and thus wishing to avoid the term. Second, by avoiding the term, she gave the appearance of disavowing her alignment with the goals of women's cinema. Confronted with the necessity of "choosing" between mainstream audience support and vocal solidarity with other feminist filmmakers, she chose the former. Additionally, von Trotta was seen to be relatively privileged among women making films. She had gained considerable experience and access to the means of production through her husband Volker Schlöndorff's Bioskop studio, a fact that did not go without notice among her peers.

If her sole purpose was to get a feminist message across to a mainstream audience, one could argue that von Trotta made the correct decision. On the other hand, it would have been possible to articulate a diplomatic response to her interviewers' questions without alienating the feminist community or mainstream audiences by further contextualization or explanation of her position. At any rate, the effect of the interviews remained: although there were occasions of mutual support between other women filmmakers and von Trotta, her treatment by feminist reviewers in Germany has suffered.[9]

By far the most common approach to *Christa Klages* was to see the film as a message of utopian humanism and to interpret the character Christa Klages as a figure embodying characteristics belonging to a quasi-composite Iphigenie, whose humanity touches all those with whom she comes into contact, and Kattrin, the mute daughter of "Mother Courage," whose drumming saves her city from ruin. This approach not only enabled reviewers to lift the film out of a strictly feminist context, but also to maneuver away from the obvious parallels between the film and the contemporary political situation in Germany. "Universalizing" the content of the film de-historicized it, to be sure, and whatever the personal attitude of reviewers toward leftist sympathizers, they did not

risk repercussions from readers, not to mention overt censorship from editors, by revealing their own positions ("Angleichung"; Beckert).

Women and Psychological Theory

Before looking more closely at the film text itself, one needs to examine a crucial area of discourse, one that has direct bearing on the appeal of *Christa Klages* for spectators in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of the many changes enabled in part by the women's movement in Europe and the U.S. during those years was an unprecedented amount of attention devoted to the psychology of women. Many researchers believed that previous accounts of human moral development, because they had been based entirely on research using male subjects, needed to be re-thought. Psychologists began to look at how the category of sexual difference complicated accepted notions of virtually every aspect of psychology. In particular, the work of Carol Gilligan in the U.S. and Margarete Mitscherlich in West Germany had a great effect on the degree to which these issues were discussed outside academic circles, since both women also published in non-academic magazines and discussed their research findings in newspapers, as well as on television and radio.

Both Gilligan and Mitscherlich were concerned primarily with the issue of the socialization of children and its effects on their moral development. While Gilligan was interested in how girls and boys differed in their moral decision-making processes, Mitscherlich looked at whether girls and boys were socialized uniquely into roles of peacefulness or aggression. It is important to note that both researchers were working from the assumption that the qualities historically attributed to women (nurturing, gentleness, etc.) were valuable. In other words, just as Gilligan and Mitscherlich were exploring how women were socialized to embody "feminine" qualities, they were clearly valorizing the qualities themselves. At this early stage of such research, neither the possibilities of differences *among* women—racial, class-based, experiential, to name a few—nor the reality that some women were aggressive and autonomous and some men gentle and relationship-oriented were of major importance. The problems surrounding what appears to be a quite essentialist assessment of women's psychology were yet to be articulated. Still, the recognition that work on moral development could be expanded to include the voices and experiences of women had a powerful resonance, and both Gilligan and Mitscherlich paved the way for numerous subsequent studies in this field.

Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) is particularly useful as we turn to *Christa Klages*. In this book she summarized some of the interviews she had been conducting on the subject of moral judgment, calling them collectively the "rights and responsibilities" study. Her research subjects were asked to discuss a hypothetical dilemma and propose a solution. The

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

dilemma, devised by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, involved a man, Heinz, his deathly ill wife, Ruth, and a druggist. Heinz was financially unable to buy a life-saving drug for his wife and the druggist was unwilling to supply the drug without charge. The respondents were then asked whether, given the situation, Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife's life. Gilligan uses the responses of two children, Jake (who argues against stealing the drug) and Amy (who argues for stealing the drug), to exemplify gendered patterns of responses to the question. According to Gilligan, Jake's responses indicated that he perceived the solution to the problem to be absolute, impersonal and inevitable, given a consensus-based societal morality. Amy, on the other hand, saw a hierarchical order of rational principles as less urgent than a contextually contingent and communication-based solution to the problem that highlights relationship and connection rather than autonomy.[10]

Christa Klages and a Gendered Moral Code

The moral dilemma just outlined, as well as the gender-based solutions to that dilemma, are enacted in similar ways in *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*. Again, the basic plot revolves around the chain of events precipitated by the fate of the day-care center. Christa's interest in saving the center stems not only from the fact that she founded it, she runs it, and her daughter attends it. Equally important is the fact that quality day care is needed by the community at large. The moral dilemma is set up as follows: the day-care center is unable to meet its lease payments and the city government is ready to evict it in favor of a new, paying tenant. Von Trotta intensifies the situation by polarizing the moral claims to tenancy of the two parties. The day-care center built by Christa attempts to provide an alternative, holistic pedagogy; accepts children regardless of parental ability to pay the full amount; admits the children of so-called "foreign guest workers"; and is run cooperatively. The new tenant, on the other hand, intends to open a pornography shop. For Christa, the absurdity of the fact that her operation would be halted by a city government unwilling to take into account the "righteousness" of her claim as opposed to the "sinfulness" of the counter-claim—money issues notwithstanding—leads her to bank robbery.

One could argue that von Trotta was indeed invoking clichés by making the new tenant a pornographer, especially since she presents pornography in an unquestioningly bad light. Not only does she ignore the contested nature of pornography itself, she allows the weight of the emotional public debates about the issue to make her argument for her. On the other hand, she could have been attempting to construct a dilemma perceived by her audience to be clear in its morality. If she thought her audiences were overwhelmingly opposed to pornography—and in the late 1970s they probably were, at least publicly—the decision to provide a

"limit case" was calculated to force the audience to confront the act of breaking the law when the ends are justified, rather than highlighting *whether* the ends are justified.

Of course Christa broke the law. But for her, as for the subjects in Gilligan's study, the most important issues did not revolve around the letter of the law, but rather took into account the context of the particular situation. For her, blind acceptance of the law would have had terrible implications, ranging from her own unemployment and the failure of her project to the loss of child care for her daughter and, more importantly, the loss of the only safe haven for disenfranchised children in her city. Accepting the fate of the day-care center would also have had ethical and moral implications. Certainly the real results would have been tragic. What drives Christa, however, is the knowledge that her inaction would mean the squandering of an opportunity to confront society with its own skewed priorities. Presented with the chance to right a social injustice, she would have remained passive.

The character of Hans represents the other model of moral decision-making, what Gilligan would characterize as the "male" model. He is the pastor of a small village parish and has connections to one of Christa's accomplices. Christa's hope is that Hans will accept the stolen money into a parish bank account, and then transfer it into the account of the day-care facility as a charitable contribution. Once Hans learns the source of the money, however, he refuses to participate in the scheme, arguing: "I don't even want to see it. No, drastic times *do not* justify drastic measures" (von Trotta and Francia 30). Even when Christa pleads with him to consider the plight of the children and questions his Christian ethics, he stays with his initial decision. He tells Christa that the idealistic notion of "the Church" she invokes does not exist, and that he is really no more than an employee of a modern, bureaucratic institution. Thus, he makes his decision based on abstract law, emphasizing the need to work consistently within the parameters of the legal system. He refuses Christa's assertion that all other avenues had been fully exhausted, but insists that even if they were, he would still refuse to be implicated in the plan.

If Christa can be understood as an example of Gilligan's "female" model and Hans as her "male" model, then the character of Lena embodies the possibililty of transition between the two. In her, we witness the transformation from one who accepts and fully participates in the laws of the society in which she lives to one who questions those laws. As a bank employee taken hostage by Christa during the robbery for a short time, Lena is the only witness able to make a positive physical identification of Christa as the woman who had robbed the bank. At first, she not only cooperates with the authorities, she strikes out on an investigation of her own. She is so invested in her work that she views a transgression against her place of employment as a personal violation. More and more, though,

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

she becomes fascinated with Christa and her life. Not only does Lena see in Christa the excitement her own life lacks, she also comes to realize the principles and motivation behind Christa's "lawlessness."

Through conversations with Christa's mother, daughter, and co-workers, and through newspaper accounts of the official investigation, Lena gradually gains sympathy for Christa and begins to see the promise Christa's way of being in the world holds for someone like herself. By the end of the film, then, when Lena is face to face with Christa and is finally able to make a positive identification for the police, she refuses to do so. The film ends with the following scene:

> Official: Miss Seidlhofer, try to remember. Look at the woman very carefully.
> Lena: Could she please take off the sunglasses and the stocking!
> (Christa slowly removes the stocking and the glasses.)
> Official: Was that the woman?
> (A few moments pass before Lena answers, but without ever removing her eyes from Christa.)
> Lena: No, she's definitely not the one.
> (Only then does she smile, almost imperceptibly, only recognizable for Christa, not for the official.) (von Trotta and Francia 87–88)

In this moment of solidarity with Christa, Lena achieves her own transformation and enables Christa's "second awakening." In this one act, Lena has changed from someone with allegiances to bourgeois society with its rigid laws to a literal "out-law," and from complicity with patriarchal institutions to solidarity with women. This shift is articulated visually through the smile she gives to Christa and *not* to the officials, and through von Trotta's composition of the shot. Lena is at the extreme left of the frame and Christa is at the extreme right, each facing the other. Occupying the space between them—separating them—is the police investigator, who is standing with his legs apart and arms crossed. All three figures are in focus. At the moment of Lena's denial, however, the camera moves in tightly to the faces of the two women, blurring the figure of the investigator and effectively wiping out his centrality in the situation. If institutions—from the Church to law enforcement agencies to city government—have been constructed in the film as oppressive, or at least rigid and unresponsive to human need, their power is effaced symbolically in this final scene. Indeed, it is through Lena's and Christa's recognition that their goals must be achieved through common work that this effacement takes place.

Like Lena, Christa's friend Ingrid is also a transitional character. Where I have attempted to explain how a continuum of moral decision-making in Gilligan's terms might look using the characters of Lena, Hans, and Christa, von Trotta and her co-scriptwriter Luisa Francia posit

a more teleological model of (feminist) selfhood. According to them, Lena occupies the least developed position, Ingrid the next position, and Christa, because of her clearly developed sense of self, the most advanced position. They explain:

> Christa, Ingrid, and Lena each have a different level of experience and consciousness. But the paths taken by the three women could be the path of a single woman. It starts with Lena, the bourgeois bank clerk, with her traditional, interchangeable wishes for marriage and a small household. As Lena comes into contact with Christa and her other way of living, she recognizes how stalled and limited her own dreams are, and ultimately it becomes impossible for her to betray this woman.... Ingrid, the second woman, already has everything Lena still dreams of: a condominium, designer furniture, and a husband with long-term job security. But when she is reunited with her schoolmate Christa, she too recognizes the lack and emptiness of her surroundings.... Now Christa Klages already has these phases behind her. She has left her marriage and home, in order to seek a new way for herself and her child, but also for others (94–95).

Whereas Lena is transformed as much by her own relentless pursuit and observation of Christa as she is by any action on Christa's part, Ingrid is more directly influenced by Christa, who initially seeks her out in search of a place to hide from the authorities. Christa urges Ingrid to talk about her relationship with her husband, Heinz; she asks pointed questions about Ingrid's choice of lifestyle that bespeak her dubiousness about its rewards and she gets Ingrid to admit, finally, that her nightmares stem from her unfulfilling marriage. Their conversations sound more like therapy sessions than discussions, and the end result is that Ingrid leaves her husband, at least temporarily, to accompany Christa to a cooperative in Portugal. There Christa and Ingrid find anonymity. They are able to let their guard down under the blazing Mediterranean sun and do physical labor alongside the local residents in an agricultural cooperative. Together they adopt the local work attire and marvel over their chafed hands, sunburns, and scraped knees. They give haircuts to the cork farmers as the women look on in amusement in a scene that is warm, relaxed, and happy. Neither the local men nor women engage in any dialogue.

Such romanticization and "letting down one's guard" has its price, however. Christa's and Ingrid's close friendship raises eyebrows, and their German contact Erich warns them that they must move on, explaining: "Women think differently here, have a different sensibility. It's still a little like in the Middle Ages. One has to respect that, don't you think?" (77). Aside from the explicit designation of the local women as "different," the reference is to their "medieval" world view, which evidently precludes perceived lesbian relationships. Erich implies that the

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

Portuguese farmers would find such relationships offensive, whereas the (more modern, progressive) Germans would find little to criticize in them, which is hardly the case.

In this film, then, the archaic and nature-bound lifestyle of their Portuguese hosts allows Christa and Ingrid to get in touch with their physicality and revel in the prizes awarded for it (their scrapes and weathered skin). They can suspend rational thought—Ingrid cannot conjure up her reasons for leaving her husband—and they can ultimately validate their own progressive tendencies by identifying the regressive beliefs of the Portugese farmers (all of whom have remained conveniently silent and incidental) they have visited and left behind. Further, Ingrid's closeness to Christa is achievable only in this context, physically separate from Germany and her husband and surrounded by people who have been constructed as radically "different."

Although Lena and Ingrid respond differently to Christa, and with varying degrees of agency and initiative, both their lives have been fundamentally altered by their encounters with her. But regardless of von Trotta's own insistence that Christa represents some sort of "end station" compared to Lena's and Ingrid's tentative first steps toward liberation and that Christa, Lena, and Ingrid represent three equally weighted possibilities for female identity, the film must be seen principally as Christa's story. It must also be seen as the story of her process toward identity, not as any end result. The title of the film itself demands such a reading, as does the structure of the narrative.

The film text is divided into five "chapters," and the titles of the chapters correspond not to any particular action or plot twists, but quite specifically to Christa's psychic journey: "Approach," "Friendship," "Community," "Solitude," and "The Second Awakening" (9). The bank robbery itself comes before the five sections, as a flashback sequence accompanied by her voice-overs. As the title sequence is still rolling, we have our first glimpse of Christa. She is standing alone in an empty room and in a voice-over says: "First I had to create my own prison, in order to comprehend what was happening with me" (13). Upon first viewing, the opening scenes are quite confusing because they are not in chronological order. The empty room of the title segment is the room she occupies during the "Solitude" segment. It is followed by a shot of Christa and her accomplice, Werner, jumping onto a train with the stolen money. Only then do we see the actual robbery. This is followed by a cut to the train, a cut back to the site of the robbery, and finally a cut to the first segment, in which Christa and Werner approach the pastor Hans.

Immediately, then, we know that we are dealing with a personal account told in the first person, and that the plot will be motivated by a need to discover and comprehend the psychological or emotional aspects of the action. We should note that Christa does not say that she wants to

comprehend "was mir passiert ist" ("what happened to me"), which would imply an external event, but rather "was mit mir geschehen war" ("what happened with me"), which, I would argue, connotes an internal process. Rather than articulating a series of events that happened *to her*—against her will—Christa indicates through the use of the construction "mit mir" ("with me") that she had agency in her own awakening.

The use of voice-over indicates that Christa also stands outside or above the narrative, just as she is in it. She speaks from the position of the newly "awakened" Christa, sharing with the viewer the process through which she came to occupy her new status. This use of the voice-over continues through the film as she interprets, relates, or summarizes the unfolding of the narrative. It also indicates the extent to which von Trotta wanted to allow her protagonist to control her own discourse, to recount her experience in her own voice, rather than have it shaped through the words of others. Von Trotta's use of Christa's voice-over to provide narrative perspective has another function as well. By foregrounding this formal element, she insists that form and content can never be neatly separated. The use of voice on the level of content—Christa's ongoing process of developing and "speaking" her own sense of self—finds formal articulation through the device of the voice-over. It is through language, through her own distinctive voice, as well as through Lena's cooperation and unspoken communication and connection with her, that Christa moves to her point of awakening.

In the segment "Solitude," Christa uses a piece of charcoal to cover the walls of her apartment with words. She isolates herself totally and carries on a dialogue with herself through verses of poetry, questions, and sayings. As she sinks deeper and deeper into herself, she becomes more and more still, until she finally lies flat on her back, not moving for days. When she does arise, she starts to drink a suicide potion, throws it away, leaves the apartment, and allows herself to be caught by the police. As we have already seen, the moment of truth comes in an unexpected way, as Lena does not betray Christa.

Christa as Messiah

In the final scene, we see how Margit Czenki is "redeemed" by Margarethe von Trotta. In reality, of course, Czenki was caught, tried, and jailed. Von Trotta has constructed in the character of Christa—whose very name is evocative, and whose "Second Awakening" is like a "Second Coming"—a quasi-feminist Christ figure whose intervention into the lives of those around her provides them with their particular salvations. While von Trotta uses parallels from the Bible positively in some instances, she subverts them in others. Consider, for example, the passages in which Christa is described as someone who works for the disenfranchised and the children of guest workers, and whose humane

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

goals are held up by von Trotta as an attempt to justify to German society the robbing of the bank. This approximates conventional understandings of similar strategies employed in the Gospel According to Luke, where the good works of Jesus are used apologetically to justify Christianity to the larger Roman society. Similarly, Christa is constructed by von Trotta as someone whose unconditional advocacy for the most powerless in German society—her good works—should justify the transgression against that society's laws.

In another New Testament parallel, Christa withdraws before the "crucifixion" in the apartment building, just as Jesus withdraws to the garden of Gethsamene before he is crucified in the Gospel According to Mark.[11] Most strikingly, however, von Trotta replicates the moment of Peter's denial of Christ in the Gospel According to Mark, but with a radically different outcome. The scripture reads: "But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know this man of whom you speak'" (Mark 14:71). Where this utterance is linked in the New Testament both to Christ's crucifixion and to Peter's recognition of his own fallibility, Lena's similar words—"No, she's definitely not the one"—lead to Christa's salvation. They also show the extent of Lena's empowerment: she now is able to act as Christa would have (von Trotta and Francia 88). Peter's denial of Christ, according to Christian belief, was part of the Passion drama that offered the promise of eternal life to the followers of the crucified Christ. In von Trotta's revision of this scene, a denial is no betrayal. Indeed, Lena's "No, she's definitely not the one" serves to lead *both* Lena and Christa out of the darkness; Lena's words represent her move away from a position as adoring apostle of German law and bureaucracy to a position of enlightened "outlaw." And this transformation, which could not have happened without Christa's influence, ultimately leads back again to Christa's own freedom and second awakening.

This kind of morality—the morality of the enlightened, humane "outlaw"—is what unites Christa's and Lena's actions with the actions of Amy in Carol Gilligan's studies. Certainly von Trotta saw in her female protagonists attributes that she felt would lead Germans to a better society. It is also clear that she was positing them as a counter to Hans, whose goodness was of little use in the context of a complicated moral dilemma. Recall the earlier assertion by Hans that the modern Church is no longer the idealized institution Christa imagines, but rather a bureaucratic structure. Thus, just as Christa and Hans embody polarities within the category of gendered morality, they perform the same function in questions of religion. Clearly, von Trotta is suggesting that Christa's unquestioning, instinctual act—in spite of its departure from worldly legality—is morally superior to Hans's refusal to operate outside the bounds of organized religion.

Almost two decades after the release of *Christa Klages*, Margarethe von Trotta seemed to have given up her hope of effecting change in German society. After directing five feature films there, all embedded to greater or lesser degrees in German political culture, she began working in Italy and has only recently returned to making films with specifically German themes.[12] Still, as critics begin now to write the history of feminist film in Germany and document the utopian impulses of the early days of second-wave feminism, *Christa Klages* must occupy a place in that endeavor. It displays what Thomas Elsaesser has referred to as von Trotta's ability to "locate a certain truth about Germany" in her films (237)—in this case, an evocation of the potential of a specifically German, specifically feminist response to the history of Germany in the late 1970s. Whether utopian-humanist, as reviewers have claimed, or messianic, as I have suggested, or morally righteous, as an interpretation based on Gilligan would reveal, the valorized attributes of Christa Klages were also embodied by Margit Czenki. But where Czenki ended up in jail for her actions, Christa Klages's "Second Awakening" brought a message of hope, if only on celluloid.

Notes

My thanks go to the editors and outside readers of the *Women in German Yearbook* for their generous and helpful comments on this article. All translations of quotes are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

[1] See, for example, Anton Kaes, Eric Santner, and Richard McCormick.

[2] See Julia Knight, Barbara Quart, and Renate Fischetti. More recently, the two-volume *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions* has appeared, offering extensive and sustained attention to women in cinema in general, but also including individual readings of films (Frieden, et al.).

[3] For a more detailed discussion of German film making during this era, see Elsaesser (36, 260). See also Frieden, et al., especially volume II.

[4] Although von Trotta's later film *Marianne and Juliane* (*Die bleierne Zeit,* 1981) deals more specifically with the events of 1977, *Christa Klages* deals with some of the same general thematic concerns.

[5] The verb "klagen" in German means to accuse or sue, as in a court of law, or to bemoan.

[6] The "Radicalism Decree" became law in 1972. It was known popularly as the *Berufsverbot* or "career prohibition" because it led to the denial of civil service jobs to persons suspected of leftist activity.

[7] For a more detailed treatment of the reception of *Christa Klages*, see Renate Möhrmann's essay in Frieden, et al., highlighting the degree to which von Trotta's first film was embraced by the public and critics alike. Also in Frieden, Barton Byg's treatment of *Marianne and Juliane* and Anna Kuhn's

[202.120.237.38] Project MUSE (2025-08-04 19:40 GMT) Fudan University

study of *Rosa Luxemburg*—both later von Trotta films—offer additional insight into von Trotta's reception. See also Coates, as well as Linville, for recent assessments of von Trotta's films.

[8] See, for instance, Wolfgang Würker, F. J. Bröder, H. G. Pflaum, Frauke Hanck, and Heino Eggers.

[9] See the review of von Trotta's later film *Die bleierne Zeit*, for example, by Charlotte Delormé.

[10] Discussions about the division between rational versus communication-based decision-making are found not only in feminist psychological theory, but also form the basis of distinction between Enlightenment and Habermasian philosophies. I thank John McCarthy for this reminder.

[11] All Biblical references are taken from the *Greek-English New Testament*. See in particular Mark 14:31–42. I thank Elizabeth A. Castelli and Lyn Loveless for discussing with me the New Testament.

[12] Von Trotta's film entitled *Il lungo silenzio* (1993), was shown at the 1993 Toronto Film Festival. A film returning to the contemporary German scene is *The Promise* (*Das Versprechen*, 1994), which deals with post-unification issues and was Germany's entry in the Oscar competition for Best Foreign Film of 1994.

Works Cited

"Angleichung durch Masse und Macht: Deutsche Filme auf der 'Berlinale.'" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 27 February 1978.

Auffermann, Verena. "Idealismus und die Folgen: 'Das Zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages' im Heidelberger 'Gloria.'" *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung* 18 April 1978.

Beckert, Michael. "Der Mut einer Frau: 'Das Zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages.'" *Saarbrücker Zeitung* 4 May 1978.

Blumenberg, Hans C. "Edle Räuberin: Margarethe von Trottas Erstling." *Die Zeit* 21 April 1978.

Bröder, F.J. "Mut zum Ausbruch: Margarethe von Trottas 'Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages.'" *Nürnberger Nachrichten* 14 April 1978.

Byg, Barton. "German History and Cinematic Convention Harmonized in Margarethe von Trotta's *Marianne und Juliane*." Frieden, et al. 259–71.

Coates, Paul. *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.

Delormé, Charlotte. "On the Film *Marianne and Juliane* by Margarethe von Trotta." Trans. Ellen Seiter, Susanne Böhmer, and Barbara Hoffmann. *Journal of Film and Video* 37 (Spring 1985): 47–51.

Eggers, Heino. "Leben jenseits der Einsamkeit: Margarethe von Trottas Film 'Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages' zielt auf die Gesellschaft." *Vorwärts* 15 June 1978.

Elsaesser, Thomas. *New German Cinema: A History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989.

Filmverlag der Autoren. *Deutschland im Herbst*. 1977.

Fischetti, Renate. *Das neue Kino*. Frankfurt a.M.: tende, 1992.

Frieden, Sandra, et al., eds. *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions*. 2 vols. Providence, RI: Berg, 1993.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982.

Greek-English New Testament, rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971.

Hanck, Frauke. "Neu im Kino: 'Das zweite Erwachen.'" *tz* (München) 14 April 1978.

Kaes, Anton. *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.

Knight, Julia. *Women and the New German Cinema*. London: Verso, 1992.

Kuhn, Anna. "A Heroine for Our Time: Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg*." Frieden, et al. 163–84.

Linville, Susan E. "Retrieving History: Margarethe von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*." *PMLA* 106.3 (1991): 446–58.

McCormick, Richard W. *Politics of the Self: Feminism and the Postmodern in West German Literature and Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991.

Mitscherlich, Margarete. *Die friedfertige Frau: Eine psychoanalytische Untersuchung zur Aggression der Geschlechter*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1985.

Möhrmann, Renate. "The Second Awakening of Christa Klages." Frieden, et al. 73–83.

Mudrich, Heinz. "Wenn eine Frau Regie führt: In der Saarbrücker 'Camera': Gespräch mit Margarethe von Trotta und François Duplat." *Saarbrücker Zeitung* 12 May 1978.

Naefe, Vivian. "Räuberin will Kindern helfen: Interview mit Margarethe von Trotta zu ihrem Film 'Das zweite Erwachen.'" *Abendzeitung* 14 April 1978.

Pflaum, Hans Günther. "Ausbruch aus dem eigenen Gefängnis: Margarethe von Trottas Regie-Debüt." *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 17 April 1978.

Quart, Barbara Koenig. *Women Directors: The Emergence of a New Cinema*. New York: Praeger, 1988.

Santner, Eric L. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990.

Trotta, Margarethe von, dir. *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages*. Bioskop Filmproduktion, 1977.

Trotta, Margarethe von, and Luisa Francia. *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1980.

Würker, Wolfgang. "Film im Fernsehen: 'Das zweite Erwachen.'" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 17 October 1980.