



JOANNA HOGG: INFLUENCES

# Ticket of No Return

## Ticket of No Return (Bildnis einer Trinkerin)

Director: Ulrike Ottinger  
Production Companies: Autorenfilm,  
ZDF – Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen  
Producer: Marianne Gassner  
Assistant Director: Ila von Hasperg  
Screenplay: Ulrike Ottinger  
Photography: Ulrike Ottinger  
Editor: Ila von Hasperg  
Costumes: Tabea Blumenschein  
Music: Peer Raben  
Cast:  
Tabea Blumenschein (*She*)  
Lutze (*drinker from the zoo*)  
Magdalena Montezuma (*Social Question*)  
Orpha Termin (*Accurate Statistics*)  
Monika von Cube (*Common Sense*)  
Paul Glauer (*dwarf*)  
Nina Hagen (*chanteuse*)  
Günter Meisner (*Willy the director*)  
Kurt Raab (*head of the office*)  
Volker Spengler (*transvestite*)  
Zirkus Renz (*funambulist*)  
The Destroyers (*helldrivers*)  
Eddie Constantine (*man at the artists' table*)  
Mercedes Vostell (*woman at the artists' table*)  
Wolf Vostell (*man at the artists' table*)  
Ginka Steinwachs (*woman at the artists' table*)  
West Germany 1979  
107 mins  
Digital (restoration)

For the BFI season, I had to include Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*. I saw it when I was 19, and it had a decisive influence on me in wanting to become a filmmaker. It's about a woman, an alcoholic, and I felt I hadn't seen a female character played with that kind of abandon on film until then. It's the boldness of the way she made that film. It's very stylised, very theatrical – I was interested in the heightened artifice of the theatrical at that time, but inside the cinema frame. It chimed with my passion for Powell and Pressburger's films, which I still love. And Derek Jarman's Super 8 films, which I was particularly fond of at the time. It felt like Ottinger was a part of a family of artists making films.

Joanna Hogg interviewed by Roger Luckhurst, *Sight and Sound*, December 2023

I love watching women walk on film. You can tell a lot about a character by observing their gait. I like the fatalistic way a dazed Jeanne Moreau wades in and out of hectic Parisian traffic in *Lift to the Scaffold* (1958), the unsteadiness of her steps echoing the quivering of a heart gripped by agony. I like how Marlene Dietrich trails after the elusive Gary Cooper at the end of *Morocco* (1930), her bare feet pressed against the burning sands and her small frame trembling beneath harsh desert winds. Under the spell of love, her shuddering strides constitute a form of cinematic spectacle, a bodily manifestation of unspoken desires.

*Ticket of No Return* (1979), a dazzlingly strange odyssey through the streets of Berlin by the German avant-garde filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger, is drawn to a different kind of wandering, one that is guided by an unabashed indulgence in frivolity, self-destruction and aimlessness. Here, the act of walking is rendered aurally as well as visually. Ringing through this urban adventure is the clickety-clack sound of high heels against marble floors, as a nameless protagonist known only as Sie – German for 'she' – embarks on a one-way trip to Berlin with the sole purpose of drinking herself into oblivion.

Her poison of choice is cognac and her path is peppered with a host of peculiar characters, including a Greek chorus of three middle-aged ladies who spout statistics about the detrimental effects of alcoholism on women and society. Primly clad in houndstooth-patterned dress suits and appropriately named *Common Sense*, *Social Question* and *Accurate Statistics*, the trio make for a humorous contrast to Lutze, a homeless woman enlisted by Sie as her new drinking buddy. There are also cameos from real-life eccentric figures like Eddie Constantine and Nina Hagen. In Berlin, rationality and the abandonment of inhibitions walk side by side.

Played by Ottinger's frequent collaborator Tabea Blumenschein, who also designed the eye-popping costumes, Sie is a wordless enigma, a silent movie star. Hopping from hotel bars to casinos, she communicates in pouts and petulant grimaces, and via the copious amount of alcohol she imbibes. While an introductory voiceover places the character within the lineage of timeless heroines like Medea, the Madonna, Beatrice, Iphigenia and Aspasia, the setting of late 1970s Berlin, where bombed streets are still visible, adds a dystopian edge to her aura. Sie's striking wardrobe reflects these contradictions, as her parade of outfit changes range from colourful pillbox hats, smartly tailored capes, white gloves and black veils to futuristic gowns in metallic silver.

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

## SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25\*  
\* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: [sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk](http://sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk)

**SIGHT AND SOUND**

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

## JOANNA HOGG: INFLUENCES

### Criss Cross

Tue 17 Oct 20:40; Sun 26 Nov 18:40

### Suspicion

Wed 18 Oct 20:45; Sat 21 Oct 18:20

### The Exiles + Bunker Hill 1956

Thu 19 Oct 18:20; Tue 24 Oct 20:40

### Lady in the Dark

Fri 20 Oct 18:10; Sat 11 Nov 12:20

### Margaret

Sat 21 Oct 20:10; Sat 4 Nov 17:30

### The Killers

Sat 28 Oct 12:30; Wed 8 Nov 20:45

### Ticket of No Return Bildnis einer Trinkerin

Sun 12 Nov 18:30; Sat 25 Nov 20:30

### Journey to Italy Viaggio in Italia

Fri 17 Nov 18:20; Tue 28 Nov 18:15

### Italianamerican + The Neighborhood + extract

from *My Voyage to Italy*

Tue 21 Nov 20:40; Mon 27 Nov 18:20

## INTERNAL REFLECTIONS: THE FILMS OF JOANNA HOGG

### Unrelated

Mon 16 Oct 20:35; Sat 25 Nov 18:10

### Exhibition

Thu 19 Oct 18:10; Wed 29 Nov 20:50

### Archipelago

Thu 19 Oct 20:30; Sun 26 Nov 15:00

### The Souvenir

Fri 27 Oct 20:30; Thu 30 Nov 18:10

### The Souvenir: Part II

Sat 28 Oct 20:30; Thu 30 Nov 20:40

### Short Films

Sun 29 Oct 18:10; Tue 28 Nov 20:45

## BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop or relax with friends in the BFI Bar & Kitchen.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious Italian sharing menu and gelato bar, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a lively DJ set with drinks on Saturday nights.

This indeterminacy of time is also present in the way *Ticket of No Return* captures Berlin's nightlife. One memorable sequence has Hagen, the high priestess of punk, up on a stage in a dimly lit bar where she sings an operetta, ferociously, about the pleasures of drunkenness. While the singer embodies the robust underground music scene of 1970s Berlin, the performance also brings to mind the satirical songs that populated the cabarets and same-sex dance halls of the Weimar era, where gay life thrived before the cruel suppression of the Nazi regime. Since the 1970s was considered another golden age of queer culture in Berlin, by evoking a sense of musical nostalgia, Ottinger, who is a lesbian, draws an auditory link between the two epochs, as well as the popular and the avant-garde, paying tribute to the long history of gay nightlife in Berlin. As the three statisticians declare while observing swaying bodies in the small bar, the city is indeed the 'centre of homosexuality'.

This fascination with the past can also be found in Sie's trail of empty glasses, as the camera movements in *Ticket of No Return* often hold on glass surfaces. The moment Sie arrives in Berlin Tegel airport, she stands nearly frozen in front of the automatic sliding doors. The camera observes her through a glass panel that is being wiped with soap, the drizzling of the cleaning liquid turning the traveller's visage into a watery abstraction. In another scene, the camera gazes at Sie as she climbs the glass-encased spiral staircase of the greenhouse in the Berlin Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum. Once again, her figure is made abstract, as if she were a particle moving through a test tube.

This visual emphasis on glass recalls a short-lived yet hugely influential architectural movement that began in Germany in the early 20th century, where the mass production of glass inspired a group of modernist writers and architects to dream of a world built upon this seemingly fragile material. A key figure in that cult of thinkers, expressionist writer Paul Scheerbarth sees glass architecture as the foundation of utopia and transparency. 'It would be as if the earth were adorned with sparkling jewels and enamels,' he writes, '[...] we should then have a paradise on earth, and no need to watch in longing expectation for the paradise in heaven.'

With the scars of war still lingering on the body of the city, the Berlin of *Ticket of No Return* is a far cry from this crystal idyll envisioned by Scheerbarth. The film's recurring images and sounds of glass being smashed, its broken pieces paving Sie's journey into the void, point to the impossibility of a united utopia in a still-divided Germany. Yet, the film's final image rests on a hall of mirrors whose design curiously resembles the fantastical sketches that sprawl through the Crystal Chain letters, a utopian correspondence created by the architect Bruno Taut in 1919. As the ground made of mirrors crumbles under the weight of Sie's footsteps in heels, a new world of creative possibilities is born out of a lost utopia.

Phuong Le, *Sight and Sound*, September 2022