

Dirty Looks: Madame X – An Absolute Ruler March 30, 2011

Ulrike Ottinger, *Madame X – Eine absolute Herrscherin*, 1978, 16mm on DVD, 141 mins.



We heard you're going to Madame X. What are your reasons?

The wrinkles and creases on our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, incites that called on us but we, the masters, were not home...

No, that's not it.

*I'm tired of the harsh light of success that rewards me with the revelation of my own mediocrity. I wish to escape from a crystallized identity, from the responsibilities of a canny maturity, which tells me to make the right moves at the right time. I wish to escape from the imperative of the next logical step in the upward mobilization of my talent and material expectations. All this in the name of a historical process that proliferates its refinements as some kind of inevitable social artistic progress. I am tired of the cycle of work, recognition, and more work imposed on me in the name of this progress. Perhaps you will say, "She has lost faith in her creative impulse." Yes, of course that follows, for does not the product of this impulse also reflect a misguided faith in artistic progress to say nothing of the opposite side of that progressive currency – a despairing sentimentality and sense of loss. Read paragraph bottom in *Sentimental Education*:*

"Having helped certain contemporary masters at the outset of their careers, the picture dealer, as a man who believed in progress, had tried to increase his profits while at the same time maintaining his artistic pretensions. His aim was the emancipation of the arts, the sublime at a popular price. All the Paris luxury trades came under his influence which was good in small matters but baneful when larger issues were involved. With his passion for pandering to the public, he led able artists astray, corrupted the strong, exhausted the weak and bestowed fame on the second-rate controlling their destinies by means of his connections and his magazine."

Aaa... why kick a dead horse?

Let me go on: I can no longer accept public recognition for work that has been produced in the utmost desperation. And finally, I wish to escape from the oppression of a love that in itself has served as a distraction from the vicissitudes and discipline required of creative work. I have tried to immerse myself in erotic passion as a substitute for creative disillusionment. I had become bored and empty. I looked to passion. I LOOKED TO PASSION TO FILL ME UP AGAIN. And this time I felt a kind of recklessness. I didn't want to think about the outcome or that my ardor might have painful consequences for all three of us. So I am fleeing from all this. From the obligations of a profession that no longer interests me, from a passion that could not consume me, and from my own emptiness. I don't care where the ship goes. Satisfied?

-Josephine de Collage played by Yvonne Rainer

Ulrike Ottinger's films are thrilling. Madcap and absurdist, they compile bizarre costumery, corny sound effects, oblique narratives and vaduvillian acting styles to create strange worlds of sexual intrigue. Surrealist histrionics might seem a peculiar platform for second-wave feminism. The crew aboard Chinese Orlando strikes a defiant tone, but the arbitrariness or impulsive nature of *Madame X's* narrative progression can appear at odds with the earnest reasoning that characterizes the second-wave for most. In this sprawling feature, in which performances explode and quell and scenes seem scripted on the fly, where are the staunchly organized arguments and political tracts evinced in other feminist plights of the era?

In an issue of *Afterall* dedicated to Ottinger, Hildegund Amanshauser observes how Ottinger's films "resist linear readings" instead "interweav[ing] multiple layers of meaning." Instead of causal storytelling – the narrative tactic of dominant cinemas – Ottinger's movies exist on a plane where meanings intersect, where cultural rituals, social conventions, and even time itself spills from one climate, one gender onto another in an echolalic narrative zone. Characters die and then reemerge in the following scene, sets shrink before their obvious, real-life settings, outfits steal entire scenes. This fluidity of meaning and anti-hierarchical structuring is Ottinger's most exciting political tool. Dashing normative expectations for a straight-forward story arc, *Madame X* is a playful remedy to hegemony. And it's all the more thrilling that Ottinger employs humor to engage her politic.

Cause it's funny; *Madame X* is absurd. And that's intentional. It's something that gets lost in the translation to Ottinger's obvious heir, Matthew Barney, where the patriarchal value systems that Ottinger so fiercely opposes, come flooding back with a vengeance. There's a incredulous joy to be had when watching the star-headed Omega Zentauri performing a ritual dance in her silver wings and whirligig hat, as the crew prepare to slaughter a troupe of bourgeois boaters who have invited Madame X onboard for a bemusing sideshow. Zentauri bobs up and down, flapping her silver wings at the self-serious member of the leisure cruise, who turns his back on her in fatigue. Of course, the joke is on them and Madame X partakes in a murderous plundering of their luxurious means, retribution for their haughty insolence.

Madame X creates a new kind of sadistic dictatorship aboard the Chinese Orlando. She is the erotic enforcer, an architectural menace. An embrace could lead to sexual jouissance or dismemberment depending upon her animalistic mood. Such are the ways of power structures, Ottinger intones. But this new matriarchy is designed to ring beyond the bows of her ship. As Karsten Witte writes, "This film shows not a trace of fearfulness. On the contrary, it is calculated to evoke fear in those who put up resistance against the fascination of this ritualized and totally aestheticized power."

Like each of these women who respond to Madame X's printed proclamation, it's easy to become swept up in these thrilling exploits. The impulsive behavior of actors, script and scene frees up the film, creating a cinematic space no longer ruled by normative structuring principles. The film itself becomes a vibrant throes to become lost in. It dashes most formal devices employed by narrative feature filmmaking – including, in large portions, sync sound. Without a masterful understanding of structure, the viewer becomes lost in the film's rhythmic unfolding of scenes, as if riding the waves that crash against Chinese Orlando.

-Bradford Nordeen