

'Marianne and Juliane' is contrast between uneasy sisters

Review by
Eric Peterson

Margarethe von Trotta's most recent film, *Marianne and Juliane*, reveals great care — careful thought, a careful eye. There are some of the same elements in *Marianne and Juliane* that there are in von Trotta's earlier film, *Three Sisters*: the same balancing and contrast of intimate but uneasy sisters, the same delving into the past and childhood through exceptionally vivid flashbacks, the same quietly beautiful images.

The focus of *Marianne and Juliane* is politics, and a comparison between mainstream and violent strategies in the Left is powerfully explored through the confrontation of Marianne and Juliane. The film showed Sunday and Monday in the Sheldon Film Theater as part of UPC's Foreign Film Series.

Juliane, the main character played by Jutta Lampe, and Marianne, played by Barbara Sukowa (who is also in the 14-part Fassbinder film *Berlin Alexanderplatz* playing this week at the Sheldon) have a more intense relation as sisters than they will ever have with other people. "We always buttoned each other's shirts, even when we hated each other," Marianne tells her sister, which neatly expresses the commitment and ambiguities of their relationship.

Juliane is a feminist journalist, and Marianne is a terrorist. There are indications that Marianne has become a terrorist in part to out do her rebellious sister; many of their actions are made in clear or implicit competition with each other. But none of their conflicts can keep them from feeling the greatest and sometimes involuntary concern. In the end, Juliane's lover, played by Rudiger Vogler, is ready to leave her because she will not be rid of her obsession with Marianne's death.

The center of the film, the short interviews between the sisters, are moments which von Trotta is able to fill with an almost breathless interest. At the first, Juliane walks past a towering row of statues, past a fence of iron bars and is not daunted by the reminders of male and martial authority. "At last!" Marianne says dramatically, although Juliane has supposedly been the one searching for her fugitive sister.

Von Trotta rarely embraces or condemns entirely or unreservedly. While Marianne is a compelling character and a mightily articulate speaker, this does not mean the film embraces her terrorism. What seems to emerge instead is a strong challenge which liberals like Juliane must face — and Marianne's life of action and martyrdom becomes the structure that Juliane embellishes — or perhaps understands and explains — with her thoughts and words.

Marianne's decision to engage in violence has both purified her will and

purpose — and cut her off from the sources of humanity and peace for which she must ultimately aim. "I've no time to cry over the death of a neurotic intellectual," she says when she hears of her former husband's suicide. "Third world children die every day," she says in response to her own and her sister's questions about letting her son Jan go into a foster home.

Some comprehension of Marianne's sense of purpose comes through a flashback of her days in a revolutionary movement called El Fath. With her jubilant and serious letters as a voice-over, she speaks of the people's faith and the frame fills with children.


When Marianne is captured and put in prison, she at first refuses to see her sister — but when Juliane writes that she wants to help, they are able to meet in the same room, with several guards present, for small amounts of time. The first time goes badly. Marianne sits in the light, Juliane in shadow — and Juliane shouts her rejection of terrorism — "Your bombs spoiled it all — you oversimplified things!"

Then comes a flashback the sisters watch a documentary about the Nazis, including the horrifying image of a bulldozer pushing emaciated corpses into a pit. Both girls leave, Juliane vomits and Marianne weeps.

This documentary is later balanced with one which Juliane and her feminist co-workers watch with the same helpless horror.

Juliane comes to feel ever more strongly her sister's desperation: "I see no one but you and my lawyer once a month. I live in utter silence and complete isolation. I can't sleep with that light, that silence." And the rest of the film is Juliane's attempt to understand and to explicate that silence and horror — through her writing, through force-feeding herself to see what it's like, through putting a cord around her own neck in a shocking emulation, — through trying to explain Marianne

to Marianne's son. A lovely image has Marianne and Juliane communicate across a separation of prison glass. "Your hands are cold," Marianne says with the old ironic smile...and the matching of their reflections in the glass is breathtaking filming and even more sensitive artistry.



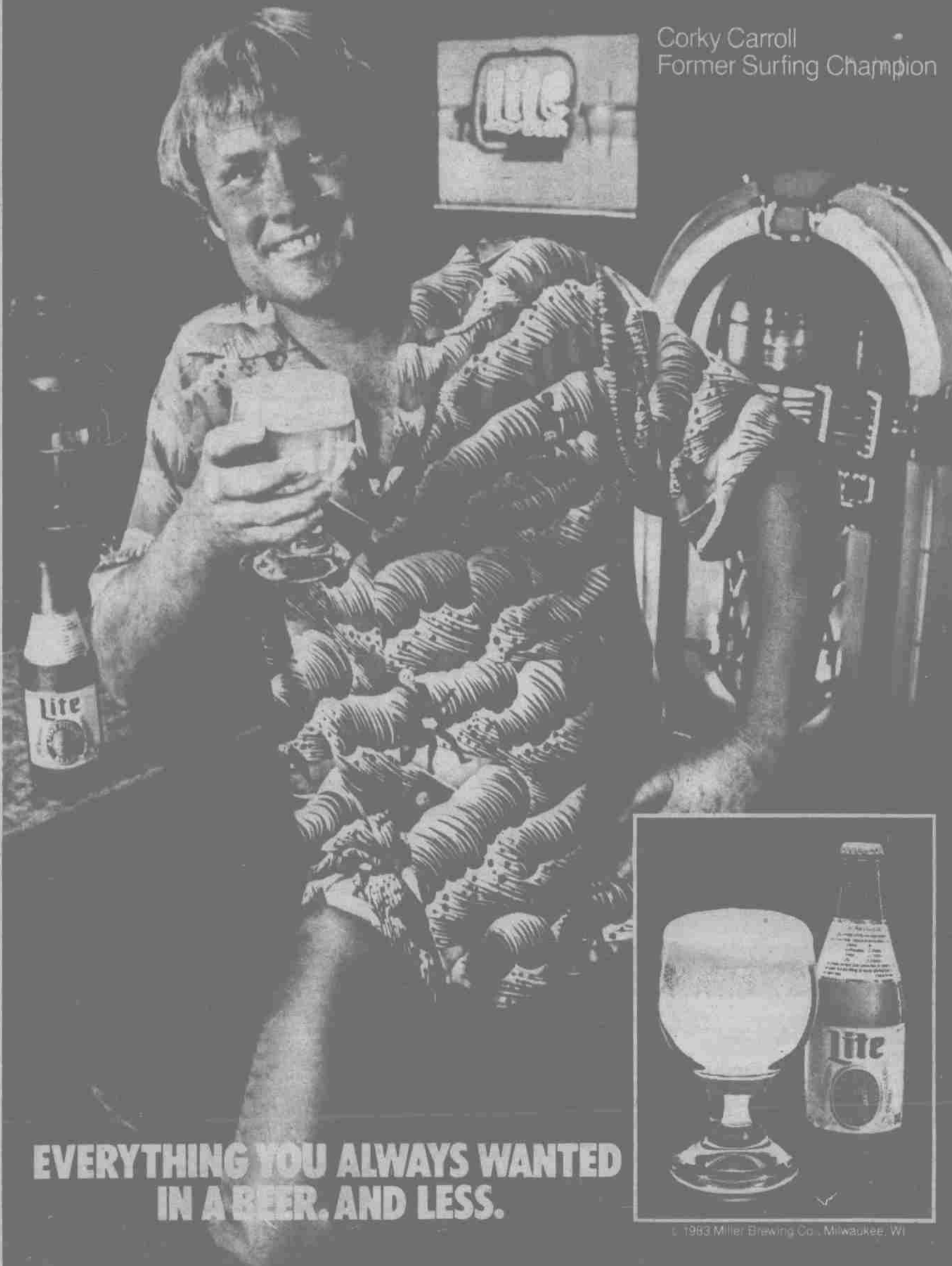
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