

# Betty Kershner, Ph.D.

## Registered Psychologist

Psychotherapy • Assessment  
Infant, Adolescent, Adult, & Family



### Clouds of Sils Maris: Truth vs. Delusion, Resistance is Futile

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Betty Kershner, PhD. is a Registered Psychologist specializing in both adults and children, from infancy onward, and recently moved her office to West Toronto. She has worked with and consulted in a wide range of settings and is familiar with many types of concerns and solutions. She is able to offer assessments and treatment. Please Contact her here.

*The Clouds of Sils Maria* portrays one woman's struggle to deny a universal truth: We age. We get old. We do not stay the same.

Written and directed by Olivier Assayas and released in 2014, the film stars Juliette Binoche, Kristen Stewart and Chloe Grace Moretz. Filmed in Germany, Italy and Switzerland, it tells the story of Maria Enders, a famous actress who reluctantly appears in a revival of the play that made her a star decades earlier; her personal assistant Valentin; and the tabloid fodder Hollywood starlet Jo-Anne. Assayas was

challenged by Binoche to “write a really great female role”. He created three.

a generation defined by “painting, politics and rock music”

Olivier Assayas was born in 1955 in Paris to a mother who was a fashion designer, a

maternal grandfather who was an acclaimed painter, and a father who was a screenwriter and former assistant to Max Ophuls, whose films often dealt with

women coming to terms with their romantic illusions about love. Assayas grew up surrounded by beauty and by members of the French film industry, in a generation defined by “painting, politics and rock music” – the radicalized youth culture in the aftermath of the 1968 revolts. He would have been 13 at that momentous time. As a young man, many of his friends were punk musicians. His first films focused on alienated youth, often set in a musical milieu. His people are beautiful, the settings rarefied, and the stakes often high.

Assayas uses a familiar cast of regular collaborators including Binoche and now Stewart (*Personal Shopper*). His directorial style is said to consist of a balance between preparation and improvisation. He works with a wide range of film modalities, (erotic thriller, film noir, literary adaptation, horror) and a variety of themes – but always his films are anchored in the personal experience of his characters. He is said to focus on “maintaining one’s sense of self as we live in the world” – which he describes as the strongest form of protest. Themes seem to emerge naturally and spontaneously from the characters. Assayas strives for a feeling of life being captured in the moment – a “situation” – a conscious creation of everyday life, the merging of art-making with life as it is lived. Assayas always maintains allegiance to real, deeply lived and felt life. He plunges you into events and conversations in process. Ordinary everyday activities fill out the characters so it feels that the story emerges from them organically with layers of thickening



complications. This film features female friendships, female rivalry, tabloid notoriety, loss of privacy in the internet age, high culture versus low, and cinema itself.

To contrast with another film about an older, established actress and a young, scheming ingénue, in *All about Eve*, (1950) a vainglorious older woman (Bette Davis), is done in by vanity and a conniving younger actress (Anne Baxter), who can then look forward to her own repetitious challenge from one yet younger (Marilyn Monroe). In contrast, the three women in *Sils Maria*, “love, talk, move, move, move”, sharing lives, trading roles and performing parts. Each woman’s life belongs to her and her alone.

*The Clouds of Sils Maria* can be described as a meditation on the intersection of life and art. In 1980, Assayas helped screen write a film, *Rendez-Vous*, with Binoche playing a young actress on the verge of fame. In *Sils Maria*, he has her contemplating what followed, brooding about the past, present and future – all focused around a play, a psychodrama about a lesbian affair between a spurned older woman and a young temptress. The play itself was inspired by Fassbinder’s *Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*.

a meditation on the intersection of life and art

Assayas’ new collaborator in *Sils Maria* is Kristen Stewart, star of the *Twilight Saga*. In *Sils Maria*, she plays, as Monohla Dargis describes her, a “new-age, pop-savvy Daisy Miller” who, “with expressive intelligence that few blockbusters allow, makes a passionate argument for the kinds of movies the actress herself is best known for”. I might add that Assayas, too, has his share of movies in genres not categorized as high art. Her performance earned Ms. Stewart a Cesar from the French Academy. Ms. Stewart easily holds her own, delivering an emotionally open performance with a “Thin-skinned naturalism that scrapes away every false note”, contrasted with Binoche’s “aggressive hauteur”.

Of note, Juliette Binoche was 50 at the time of filming, playing 40 or so. Her movie release just prior to *Sils Maria* was Godzilla.

*Sils Maria* is set in a part of the Swiss Alps known for its haunting cloud formations and where, in 1881, the idea of “eternal recurrence” came to Nietzsche “6,000 feet beyond man and time”.

The movie harkens to Nietzsche’s beliefs about truth and the value of life.

Born 1844, deceased 1900, Nietzsche considered the affirmation of life to be his defining philosophical achievement. He strove to see beauty in “what is necessary in life” and considered self-interpretation to emerge from “things [which] really do have a profound significance and use precisely for us” – truth and reality unique for each person. He was entranced by the idea of repetition: “Do something and do it again, think of nothing else except doing this well, as well as I alone can do it”.

According to Nietzsche, one’s life is good only if, upon imagining its return in every detail, we can ‘affirm it as it is’ and, one better be honest, not self-deluding.

Nietzsche considered truthfulness a measure of strength, our “virtue”:

“How much *truth* does a spirit endure, how much truth does it *dare*?”

He considered it contemptible to accept things on faith, without examination – and saw life as an experiment. Whether or not life can be well-lived depends on the confrontation of truth with the temptation for self-deception. To what extent can truth be incorporated into one’s life? He viewed religious beliefs as wishful thinking, cognitively corrupt, cowardice, and an honest devotion to truth both indispensable and dangerous.

Every perspective, viewpoint, philosophy, is an enactment of the psychology of its creator, a personal confession, an involuntary memoir, satisfying a psychological need.

Nietzsche believed that there is no such thing as disinterested contemplation – everything is influenced by one’s own perspective and there is no such thing as the kind of independent truth posited since Plato, “the way things really are”. Our perspective grows from our own individual psychology, ineliminable, rooted in our affects and their associated values. Truth is not knowable to Nietzsche. One must be able to weight the pros and cons of one’s perspective, exploit the difference between one’s own and the perspectives of others to overcome one’s own limitations in perception.

Every perspective, viewpoint, philosophy, is an enactment of the psychology of its creator, a personal confession, an involuntary memoir, satisfying a psychological need.

The Eternal Recurrence of the Same, inspired in Nietzsche by the Clouds of Sils Maria, the Maloja Snake, was regarded by him as his most important line of thought. His view was that all events in the world repeat themselves in the same sequence, through an eternal series of cycles, something like karma, something like the Bill Murray film Groundhog Day. It is the structure of time or fate, a thought experiment designed to test whether one’s life has been good.

something like karma,  
something like the Bill  
Murray film  
*Groundhog Day*

One imagines the endless return of that exact same life, and one’s emotional reaction reveals something of how valuable one’s life has been, e.g. would one marry again if the choice was again available? It is an assessment.

The past recurs, the same in every detail, not just once, but eternally. But perhaps one’s perspective has changed.

To Nietzsche, reoccurrence is a device to overcome the tendency to focus on the future, an opportunity to evaluate the past in order to achieve a sense of its value.

He considered looking to the future dishonest if the purpose is in order to ignore aspects of ourselves we would rather not admit to: e.g. I'm glad not to have to deal with THAT anymore.

Imagining the past happening again and again forces a kind of honesty in thinking about it. In many religions, affirmation of life is what Nietzsche calls conditional, a test of faith, to be redeemed in a future in Heaven. Life recurring eternally blocks this and returns one to real life by imagining that there will never be a point at which one could pretend that finite life is once and for all over and done with. To imagine one's life as eternity reinforces an examination and valuation of what it is worth and, if affirmed – that what we are experiencing, possibly joy if one is able to find beauty in what is necessary, could go on forever. To Nietzsche, this was the Maloja Snake.

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Now to the film.

As the scene opens, we see Valentin balancing in the swaying train, juggling the phones and Maria's needs and demands: the scene itself shows us her competence in typical Assayas fashion, as she goes about her everyday life. Quickly, we start to get a sense of her familiarity with Maria: Valentin is not just an employee. She stumbles, introducing herself on the phone, starting to label herself as Maria's personal assistant, then laughing and remembering to add the more formal "Maria Enders". To Valentin, everyone knows who Maria is. Her admiration for Maria in the beginning of the film is clear. In a scene shortly after, when Maria enters the stage for Wilhelm's memorial, the applause goes on and on. Valentin is delighted. She savours the validation that Maria is a great actress, a real artist, much appreciated.

Back on the train in that first scene, Maria does not even bother to respond to Valentin's question about whether she approves the hotel that Valentin has booked

them into. Maria takes Valentin for granted. The speech that Maria is writing gives us the back story of who she is and her relationship with Wilhelm. Valentin is extremely attentive to this back story. She wants to know about people and their relationships. As she says at one point, "What else is real?" We are told how private a person Wilhelm is, but not why he will not allow Maria to bring his award to him after the ceremony. We soon learn that instead of a celebration for Wilhelm Melchior, it will be a memorial.

Wilhelm abhorred publicity. The comments on the net following news of his death show that people, at least people who comment on the net, are not aware of who Wilhelm was, and do not appreciate him.

We see Valentin's influence on Maria, who wants to turn around and go home, but Valentin convinces her to continue on. They talk about the play, *The Maloja Snake*, both play and film that Wilhelm wrote, Maria acted in and achieved her fame. There are these tidbits that Wilhelm penned, at least a beginning to a new play about Sigrid, the young actress, 20 years later. That interests Maria: she identifies with Sigrid, stating at one point: "I am Sigrid", whom she describes as free, unpredictable, destructive, but most of all, free. Maria adds that this was her way of protecting herself. Maria says she is Sigrid's youth. Her agent tells her everyone gets older. We get a sense of her fragility, her need for defense. She cannot see herself as Helena, the older woman who, we are told, commits suicide when spurned by Sigrid in the play.

There is an interesting abrupt change of perspective. We are shown a long shot of a gorgeous landscape, the valley, then a sharp close-in to police collecting Wilhelm's body: from the eternal to mortality.

In the car after they are met at the train station, Valentin reacts to everything that is said to Maria: she knows how Maria will take it, even as Maria puts on a show for

the others. In the hotel, Valentin knows how to arrange the room to Maria's liking. She tells the other assistant that yes, Maria will appear at the memorial service, even if Maria herself does not yet know it, or is she, Valentine, perhaps confident of her ability to persuade Maria? Does Valentin really understand Maria and the processes that Maria will go through to get to some conclusion, or does she manipulate and control Maria? Maria says, "I can't deal with this, it is impossible".

Looking at the jewelry and gowns offered for her to wear to the occasion, Maria seems comforted, calmed. She knows the role that she can step into and how to play it. Rosa tells Maria about Wilhelm's illness and suicide: only for Maria to know and no-one else. Rosa burns Wilhelm's notebooks.

In Turin, at the after-party, Maria is confronted by a meeting with the director for the project that she has already rejected: a re-staging of *Maloja Snake*. Valentin arranged the meeting despite Maria's decision, and coaxes Maria into talking with the director. All along, Valentin pushes this project on Maria: we don't really know why. She claims that the director is so "sick", meaning he is the best. The other actress, Jo-Anne, is her favourite because of how real she is, she's not anti-septic, she's brave enough to be herself. Somehow, the very things that Maria was noted for when she played the role of Sigrid, are taken from her. Then, Maria's modernity was contrasted with the conventional acting style of poor Susan Rosenberg, who played Helena. Now, Maria refers to herself when talking with Valentin about Jo-Anne, as "conventional". The role is pushed upon her in more ways than one.

They are the same, Sigrid and Helena, the young, "sick" director tells Maria. They are two women with the same wound. They have the same violence, but was it hidden or tamed? There are multiple conversations about who Sigrid was, and what was the basis for the attraction and relationship between the two of them, multiple theories, multiple perspectives each of which may be true for the one who holds and offers it. Later, when the tabloids break the news about Jo-Anne, her relationship, and the suicide attempt of her lover's wife, the director, "Klaus Klaus", is asked if that will dominate the reactions of the audience to the play and he calmly



says, no, each one who comes to see it will have their own perspective, it will mean what it means to each one and that would be the case tabloids or no: each theatre-goer brings their own subjectivity.

I was interested in Rosa, and how content she seemed faced with the suicide of her husband. She is loyal to him, burning his papers as one presumes he wanted. She leaves the home, finding it too hard to be there, but takes Maria to the spot where Wilhelm killed himself, leaving nothing to chance. Rosa smiles and seems satisfied. She is able to enjoy the moment in the beauty of the location, the Maloja Pass. Perhaps her assessment of her husband's life, he whom we are told shunned publicity, for whom she burned his papers, who apparently lived his life as he chose it and chose to exit rather than continue on with illness, perhaps Rosa assesses Wilhelm's life as good, the best life and ending he could have when faced with the reality of his illness, a truthful confrontation with reality, and is content.

As the play progresses, Maria cuts her hair, looking more and more masculine. Her dependence on Valentin grows, correlated with Valentin's growing disappointment in Maria, and her withdrawal.

Running lines for *Maloja Snake*, the line between life and performance is trampled. Maria makes a Freudian slip on the word "humiliate". She states that Helena, the part she is reading, is not her, is defeated by age and insecurity. Valentin makes a Freudian slip in turn, saying she "does not" accept when the line calls for her to say the positive, that she does. She is withdrawing from Maria. "I am Sigrid", Maria says. "I want to stay Sigrid". She cannot face the reality that 20 years have passed. She will, she will not, do the play. Valentin knows that Maria will do it. She tells Maria that the script is an object and that it changes perspective depending on where you are standing.

Returning in the fog from a night with Bert, Valentin travels along with the clouds of the Maloja Snake. She vomits by the side of the road. This is the only place in the film where we hear modern music: a repeated refrain, "Better survive". I notice that Valentin is wearing a shirt with a print that looks like snake scales. Later, when she disappears, she has on a sweater with similar zigzags. Valentin will not tell Maria about her relationship with Bert, but says, "Fuck Bert". Perhaps she told him she was pregnant and he did not want the baby. When she disappears, I do not think that Valentin went to Bert. She is her own person.

Valentin and Maria run the lines: "If I stay, nothing will change. I'll have a tighter and tighter hold". She tells Maria that we are not allowed to regret anything, that we are the sum total of all of our experience and that Maria can recapture innocence by accepting Helena the way that she accepted Sigrid, that the world moves and she wants to be part of it. The implication is that now Maria does not move, she is not flowing along like the clouds over a pre-determined landscape that shapes the journey we all must take but allows us to live each moment along the way, facing the truth of that moment. This is not what Valentin, young Valentin, who says of course youth trumps wisdom, wants for herself. She disappears. Only around then do we learn that we don't really know if Helena in the play suicided. Most assume that she did, but what she did was to disappear.

As they rehearse the final rehearsal for *Maloja Snake*, Maria is lost. She is disrespected and humiliated, told that she is all washed up, but of course that doesn't mean her, and left pretending it is fine while fooling no-one. At this point, she is no longer fooling herself. Nietzsche would perhaps say that she is confronting the discrepancy between what she wants to believe, her self-delusion, and finally facing what is really there. Of course, there are any number of perspectives that are open to a woman age 40 or 50 facing her own aging. For Maria, it is a big shock. To Nietzsche, that is the beauty of life, that confrontation, and now Maria has the chance to make something of herself based on that reality.

In the Zen tradition, "Cloud" is often part of the name of a beginning student. Clouds follow along, not resisting. They wander. They bring healing, in the form of rain or shade. They don't have preferences. A cloud does not wrestle with itself or

find fault with itself. It follows the contours of the earth and winds and flows along in the true rhythm of life.

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Betty Kershner, Ph.D.  
Registered Toronto Psychologist  
25 Morrow Ave, Suite 100  
Toronto ON M6R 2H9  
**416.518.7758**