

OPENCITY

FILM

"THE POINT OF CUBISM," Gertrude Stein once remarked, quoting Picasso, "is you paint what you know is there, not what you can see." During the first two decades of this century, a community of extraordinary women followed all roads leading to Paris, then a vibrant nexus of artistic and intellectual life. These women included the author and arts patron Gertrude Stein and her lover/partner, Alice B. Toklas, booksellers Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, novelist Djuna Barnes, and journalist Janet Flanner, who chronicled this cultural convergence over a span of some three decades in her popular *New Yorker* column, "Letter from Paris."

Equipped, even blessed, with the illuminating subtexts built into this "City of Lights"—via literature, painting, film, and photography—director Greta Schiller's **Paris Was a Woman** nevertheless manages to paint only what is on the surface.

This is an opportunity seized but missed; a *Life* magazine layout with its story built on captions.

Each of the women Schiller profiles here is worthy of a documentary all her own, but here we get only sideways glances: footage of Gertrude Stein being attacked by her pet poodle; Janet Flanner on Picasso, on Joyce, on everyone but Flanner; two minutes of a female filmmaker's work so out of context it becomes visual gibberish.

Schiller's project, as she claims, "recreate[s] the mood and flavor of this female artistic community in Paris during its most magical era." By that one might expect that she would concentrate as much on atmosphere as she does on anecdote. Unfortunately, however, if we are to believe the "mood and flavor" of Schiller's piece, these women popped in from nowhere, worked in a hedonistic vacuum, and then popped off to oblivion as soon as Hitler hit town. Nowhere is the cliché of the Parisian muse, which Schiller invokes, actually critiqued. In fact, although she complains that generations of male poets and artists took Paris for a mistress, her own characterization of the city as

misguided as the male ideal.

Perhaps most disappointing of all is the surprising lack of commentary on Paris itself, and, by extension, on the very real social and political conditions of these women's lives. We are told that they came to Paris to find intellectual and sexual freedom. Within their own tight community, they did. But what about Paris at large? With less than a pinch of irony, Schiller tosses off the item that women were still barred from French politics; that Stein couldn't find a publisher because no one took her seriously; that of the many talented female

writers, only Barnes seemed to get recognition in the male literary community; that the all-male Academie Francaise refused to admit Colette, even after she received a high honor from the French government. As far as the evidence presented here is concerned, this amazing group could just as well have been working in Cleveland as Paris.



Ms. Paris

Paris was not a woman. By imagining that it was, Schiller paints portraits, but fails at that cubist ideal of painting more than what can be seen; we are left with no idea of what—or who—was really there. *Plays Friday to Monday at the Varsity.* **TONIA STEED**